

The Ringlet: Part III

by Daniel Harris

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Isabella

Tropical storm Nadine ravaged the outer keys of Sarasota. Ashford Garth Willingsham IV's mansion on Longboat Key was badly damaged. The beach was eroded and the gulf side of the house had collapsed. The storm surge had inundated the house to a height of two feet. Looters had helped themselves to most of its contents before police cordoned off the area. Ashford had fled to New York City. He was now ensconced in a suite at the Waldorf-Astoria.

Anatoly Gringovitch walked the beach on Longboat Key surveying the storm's damage. A sheriff's deputy was asleep in his cruiser when Gringovitch arrived at the remaining beach opposite the Willingsham mansion. The sand was covered with shards of mirror glass, which reflected the bright sun in myriads of twinkling daylight stars.

He noticed what appeared to be a painted canvas buried in the sand. It would be tricky to pull it from the sand without cutting himself. Kneeling on his backpack to protect his knees, Gringovitch finessed the painting out of the sand. What he recovered was part of a much larger canvas. He could see other fragments, but this was the largest piece. The rescued piece was a finely realized red hair and white skin. It was difficult to determine the original painting's subject matter, but the fragment was interesting enough. He rolled up the canvas and put it in his backpack. Whoever had painted the picture was a photo-realist painter. The only local photo-realist painter he knew was Carl Peltmeister, a Sarasota resident, who had a reputation for painting sexual explicit, or radically political pictures. Gringovitch didn't know Carl, but Carl had bought

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Gringovitch's abstract *Nude with Orange*, the only painting sold at his one-man show at Burns Court Café. Gringovitch would ask Cynthia if she had Carl's address.

Gringovitch rode over to Carl's house on his bicycle. He knocked Carl's door, no answer. He saw a woman across the street that looked vaguely familiar. She was watering her flower garden.

-Excuse me, but do you know if Carl Peltmeister is home? asked Gringovitch.

-He's almost never home, replied Marge. He goes to his studio early in the morning dressed in a suit and tie. Do you have business with him?

-I found what could be one of his paintings on the beach after the storm. I thought I could give it to him to repair and return to the owner.

-If it's one of Carl's paintings, it's better off destroyed, sneered Marge. His paintings are pornography.

-I don't know his paintings, so I wouldn't know if that is true, said Gringovitch trying to mollify the situation.

- Oh...My...God, they are disgusting! I pity the poor girls and boys who posed for them. He uses a microscope type instrument to amplify the finest detail, which he paints on huge canvases. And...

-The instrument is called a *camera obscura*, interrupted Gringovitch. Do you know where I might find Carl?

-He's probably in his studio on Orange Avenue north of Fruitville.

-Thank you. Nice flower garden, said Gringovitch mounting his bicycle.

-If he's working with a model, he won't answer the door, Marge shouted at Gringovitch's back.

Gringovitch knocked Carl's studio door and was buzzed in immediately. After handshakes and pleasantries, Gringovitch unrolled the canvas fragment for Carl.

-Yes, I know that painting. I titled it *The Ringlet*. I sold it to a man on Casey Key five or six years ago for ten thousand cash. The most recent owner is Ashford Garth Willingsham IV. He bought it at

auction from Christie's in New York City earlier this year for \$1.15M.

-I attended a party at Willingsham's mansion a few months ago and saw it hung in his bedroom. All the walls were mirrored, so it seemed like you were actually *in* the painting. Made a piece of art into a fun-house shtick. I was not happy...you could imagine.

-Do you know who the model is?

-Of course, but I only know her first name, which may be false.

-What is her name?

-Isabella. A sweet young woman with classic features.

-A professional model?

-None of my sitters are professional. If I remember, she told me she was a grade school teacher. Probably married with children by now.

-What should I do with this fragment?

-Finders, keepers. I have no interest in returning to that project and I'm sure Ashford is well insured.

Both men walked over to where Gringovitch's *Nude with Orange* resting on an easel. They stood looking at it for a few minutes.

-I like how you abstracted the woman, said Carl. People ask, where is the orange? I point to the orange blotch, which could be the sun or perhaps a door open to the sun.

- I like ambiguities, said Gringovitch. The unanswered question: Is the model sitting, reclining or half standing? Notice how she wears her nudity like clothing. Your paintings are the opposite technique: every detail, no matter how minute, is rendered exactly. Very powerful.

Carl walked over to the studio door.

-You should keep that painting fragment, said Carl. If you should find the model, she has preserved that very ringlet of hair in a locket she wears. I found the ringlet of hair on the floor after her last session and gave it to her as a memento. She had totally denuded her pubic area for that painting except for that lone lock of hair. If nothing else, it is a great conversation starter.

-Sounds like a Greek myth or something, offered Gringovitch.

-If it is a myth, then you will have to perform some special tasks to find the girl, but you will be well rewarded, said Carl with a wink.

-That's throwing down the gauntlet, laughed Gringovitch.

-Consider it a hairline in the sand, punned Carl.

Marge and Isabella were sitting in the Drunken Poet Café on Main Street, Sarasota, eating sushi.

-Remember that crazy Russian Jew artist we met at Burns Court Café? asked Marge.

-Oh yes. He was terrific. I was in love, said Isabella.

-No, Bella, you were in your cups with cheap white wine.

-What about him?

-I saw him yesterday knocking on Carl Peltmeister's door. He asked me how to find Carl.

-So?

-He said he found one of Carl's paintings on the beach, explained Marge. He wanted to give it to Carl so he could repair it and return it to the owner.

Isabella blanched.

-Did he have the painting with him? she asked trying to hide her panic.

-Not that I could tell. I told him what I thought of Carl and his so-call art. It's nothing but lurid pornography.

-You certainly are correct about that. I don't know how anyone could pose for him, Isabella replied disguising her complicity.

Isabella was angry and distressed. If Gringovitch found Carl's painting of her, she reasoned, she could never start a relationship with him. After being smitten by Gringovitch at Burns Court Café, she hoped she would see him again. She dragged Marge to art shows, gallery openings and every art event in Southwest Florida. They never saw him.

The art teacher at school showed her an article in *ArtNews* about Gringovitch's one-man show at PS 1 in New York City. There was a photo of Gringovitch standing in front of a large abstract painting of a woman. She bought a copy of *ArtNews*, cut out the article and

saved it in her diary. Isabella, she said to herself, I have to see Carl to find out if the painting Gringovitch salvaged from the beach was the one Carl painted of me. If it is *that* painting, any chance of a relationship with Gringovitch is finished. How could his motives be trusted after he saw that painting? What would he think of her?

Three times Isabella went to Carl's studio. He never answered the door. On the fourth try, the landlord was talking to some roofers in front of the building. He told her Carl was in Switzerland having etchings printed and would not return for three months.

That Saturday, Isabella helped Marge prepare her gardens for winter. Marge could tell that something was bothering Isabella. She was as nervous as a bitch in heat.

-Bella, what is *wrong* with you?

-I can't explain it. I have to see Gringovitch, but I don't know where he is or what to say to him.

-Those are two good reasons *not* to see him. You don't know where he is and you would be speechless if you found him.

-But I *must* see him!

-Bella, you are making a big mistake. Better you cut off your hair and become a nun than get involved with that crazy artist. Besides he must be twenty years older than you.

-But, I'm almost thirty, whined Isabella.

-He'd be dead by the time you hit your prime. Who needs that? said Marge. Besides, he probably doesn't have two nickels to rub together. If you marry that guy, you'll be singing nap songs to kindergartners 'til you die.

When Isabella left Marge's house, she drove the two blocks over to Burns Court Café. She ordered a Wild Berry Smoothie.

-Are you the owner? she asked the woman at the cash register.

-Yes, this is my café. My name is Cynthia.

Cynthia was a beautiful woman in her forties. She had large alert eyes, perfectly coifed black hair and a slim figure with all the right curves. Her mother was French, her father Peruvian. She spoke English with a charming accent and was famous for her quiches.

-A year or so ago, you had an exhibit by an artist named Gringovitch, said Isabella.

-Ah, yes, Anatoly Gringovitch. He eats here regularly. He and my husband are always plotting creative projects that eat up money, but never buy groceries.

-I think he found a piece of a puzzle. I need to reach him, said Isabella blushing.

-Actually, Anatoly is with my husband right now, taking photographs of storm damage. They should return soon.

Isabella would be mortified if Gringovitch showed up and saw her in sweaty gardening clothes. She would have to go home and clean up.

-How late are you open? asked Isabella.

-Until six on Saturdays. We are closed Sunday. Normally on weekdays we are open eight to eight.

-Thank you. Does Gringovitch come here on certain days?

-No, he marches to his own beat. But he does come on Friday evenings. He and my husband always have some caper on Saturday afternoon. If it's raining, they play chess and drink beer. He helps my husband with repairs. Gringovitch is a very hands-on guy.

-Thank you.

-Can I give him a message? asked Cynthia.

-He probably won't remember me, but my name is Isabella. Tell him I have the other piece of the puzzle. He might remember my red hair from the opening.

-Your red hair *is* unusual. Do you always wear it in a French twist?

-Yes. I don't want to cut it, but I need it out of the way. I'm a kindergarten teacher. When I wear it down, the children want to touch it.

-It looks like silk, said Cynthia.

-Feel it, said Isabella leaning her head towards Cynthia.

Cynthia cupped the French twist.

-Ooo-la-la, It is like silk, magical!

Isabella felt her face burn.

-Your smoothie was excellent. I will come back soon, said Isabella. If you see Gringovitch tell him I have the missing piece of the puzzle.

-If you wait, he should be here within the hour, said Cynthia.

-No, I am too grimy from gardening. Some other time, perhaps.

Cynthia told Gringovitch that Isabella had the other piece of a puzzle. He should wait for her next Saturday at the café. What was this puzzle? He'd been looking for Isabella since he met her. Now there was a mystery.

Gringovitch had sketched Isabella's portrait from the photos he had of her from the art opening. He wished he would run into her somewhere, but he was too busy with his New York show to make a serious search. Now she was baiting him with what Gordian knot?

He put his Isabella sketchbook in his backpack, and bicycled to Burns Court Café. Cynthia's husband, Arie, an Israeli was expecting him for a game of chess. Arie was the most enthusiastic person he knew. Everything interested him and he had an encyclopedic memory of music and chess games

Gringovitch looked through the window of the café as he locked his bicycle. There was Isabella, sitting by herself staring at a laptop computer. He was going to ignore her and greet Cynthia and Arie, but his feet took him straight to her table.

-Hello, Isabella. I'm Anatoly Gringovitch.

Isabella had not seen him enter the restaurant and was startled.

-Yes, hello, I'm Isabella, she said, all a-fluster.

-Cynthia tells me you are looking for me.

-Yes, I have a piece of the puzzle.

-A puzzle? asked Gringovitch.

-I believe you found a painting by Carl Peltmeister, said Isabella.

-Why, yes I did. I showed Carl what was *left* of the painting.

-What was the subject?

-I don't know, it is only a fragment of a very large painting. It looks like a ringlet of red hair.

-Is that all?

-Yes. The fragment is quite tattered and small. Carl told me the original painting was twelve feet square. This piece is perhaps two feet long by eighteen inches wide. I found it in the sand on Long Boat Key.

Isabella exhaled slowly. She hadn't realized she was holding her breath.

-I see you two have found each other, said Cynthia smiling.

-Yes, said Gringovitch. I kept wondering who the woman was behind the name. The red hair was the clue. Now the puzzle is finished. I will take a *Leffe Blonde*. Do you care for a beer, Isabella? The *Leffe* is very good Belgian beer.

-Thank you, but only if I pay for it, insisted Isabella.

-Whatever you wish, said Gringovitch. You redheads can be stubborn.

Isabella glared at him.

-I have filled this sketchbook with drawings of you. You have such a classic face. I used the photographs I took of you at the opening as my models. Do you want to see them? asked Gringovitch.

-Are they decent?

-Absolutely. They are beautiful.

Isabella and Gringovitch left Burns Court Café at seven with Gringovitch's bicycle in the back of Isabella's Subaru Forester. He showed her his studio. She agreed to come the next day for a portrait. It was the first time she had ever been kissed by a man with a beard. It tickled her face. She felt the tickle all the way home. She savored the memory.

Isabella decided against a bra and donned her finest blouse, jeans, and a wide brimmed straw hat. She sang to herself as she drove to Gringovitch's studio. His studio was the largest room in his house. The house was rather messy, but the studio was immaculate. He sat Isabella in an antique armchair and fussed with lights and window blinds until he was satisfied.

Gringovitch's concentration was the equal of Carl's. Isabella always thought painters were much more relaxed. After an hour, Isabella was getting tired.

-Do you know Carl painted me? said Isabella.
-Yes, he mentioned it. He said you were an excellent model.
Please hold your head still. If you are tired, we can rest.
-Yes, a short break.

-Dinnertime? asked Gringovitch.
-I'm not hungry, answered Isabella, and I must go home now and prepare for my class tomorrow.

-What kind of preparation does a kindergarten teacher have to make? asked Gringovitch with a chuckle.

-Well, I bake cookies for the children's snacks. I must shampoo my hair and prepare my wardrobe for the week and then I can't miss Masterpiece Theater.

-Well, I guess my bachelor's pasta can't compete with cookies and hard-bodied British actors. When can you pose again?

-Not until the weekend. School makes me tired and I have to prepare myself for each day.

Isabella went to pose for a month of Saturdays and Sundays. They engaged in some protracted smooching, but nothing more intimate. Gringovitch was totally focused on her portrait.

When he showed her the finished portrait, she wept at its beauty. She never considered herself beautiful. She could see the love in it. She wanted to have sex with him, but she was afraid. Isabella knew he had a section of the picture Carl had painted of her with no pubic hair. Because Carl took so long to paint the picture, she'd had undergone multiple treatments at Laser Hair Removal. They explained to her that her pubic hair would never grow back. They guaranteed it

I want to paint you in the pose of Goya's *The Naked Maja*, said Gringovitch. Would you pose?

The question yanked Isabella from her reverie. Isabella did not know what to say. She had posed nude for Carl and he had painted her private parts in microscopic detail. But she had feelings for Gringovitch. How would she explain that she had no pubic hair? Pubic hair was the shocking new thing in Goya's painting: *The*

Naked Maja. It was the first major painting to display a woman's pubic hair since the cave painters. She remembered Sister Wendy's lispy impulsive description: "a glorious fluffy bush".

-Let me think about it, she said. I like you, but maybe that is not a good thing for us.

-I understand completely, said Gringovitch. Did I ever show you the portion of Carl's painting I rescued from the beach?

-No. I'm not sure I want to see it.

-It is just one strand of red hair, said Gringovitch. The detail is astounding.

-Well...if you insist.

Gringovitch went to an armoire and brought out the rolled up canvas. He unfurled it in one quick motion, turned and displayed it for Isabella. Isabella walked toward Gringovitch's outstretched arms. Her heart was racing. This *was* the painting she feared it was.

-No! screamed Isabella clutching the locket on her chest. No, no, no!

-What's wrong, Isabella? Did I do something wrong?

-Burn it. Please, for the love of God, burn it. If you care for me at all, burn it now! Isabella's knees were failing her. She fell to the floor her chest heaving, legs flailing.

-Isabella, Isabella. Stop. You will hurt yourself.

-Please, burn that painting. Do it now!

-Isabella, it's all that's left of a masterpiece. A serious masterpiece!

-I don't care. Carl has poisoned my life with that painting. The whole experience, the entire process was evil...despicable. Why, oh why did I agree to do it?

-Come, come, Isabella. How could you be so hysterical over a painting of a single hair?

-It's *my* hair. Carl corrupted it. He made it evil! Isabella howled like a she-wolf.

-Easy, calm down, Isabella, said Gringovitch soothingly.

Isabella convulsed on the floor, alternately flailing her legs and then curling up in a fetal position. It was a seizure like a child's tantrum.

-Okay, okay, I'll burn it.

Gringovitch took the canvas to the gas fireplace in the studio, started the fire and gingerly fed the canvas into the flames.

Isabella simultaneously unloosened a long high-pitched scream, which made a slow descending glissando, ending in a quiet hiccup.

Gringovitch dropped the last of the painting into the fire. Isabella lay motionless on the studio floor.

-Isabella, are you awake?

Isabella was moaning, not moving.

-Isabella, answer me. Are you okay now? What happened to you?

Gringovitch was concerned. She could have swallowed her tongue, or hurt herself. He checked her mouth. Everything seemed normal.

-I'll fetch some water. Please be calm.

Isabella was rolling on the floor clutching at her belt. Her jeans were bulging at the crotch. She was struggling to remove her jeans.

-Help me. Please help me, she screamed.

Gringovitch ran back into the studio.

Isabella began emitting rapid squeak sounds like a small animal. She pointed to her crotch. Her eyes were rolling from side-to-side spittle dripping from her mouth. The only sounds were the squeaks and the rocking of her hips on the floor as she tried to remove her jeans.

Gringovitch snatched a box cutter from his worktable and carefully cut off Isabella's jeans and underwear. Isabella's hips had become the axis of a whorl of glistening red pubic hair. Gringovitch touched the expanding red whorl. It was hot, very hot. Before his eyes the whorl was growing and expanding.

Isabella's eyes were begging for help.

-Do something, she mouthed.

Gringovitch noticed that Isabella's beautiful red hair was receding into her skull.

-What the hell is going on here! he shouted. What can I do?

-Burn the ringlet, commanded Isabella. But it wasn't Isabella's voice. The words came from Isabella, but it was the voice of Carl Peltsmeister.

Isabella's locket lay open and empty on the floor. The wood floor under the locket was smoking. Gringovitch reached to retrieve the locket. His hand reflexively snapped away. The locket was too hot to touch. It was turning red-hot. Gringovitch went to his tool chest and grabbed a pair of pliers. He snatched the locket from the floor and flipped it in the fireplace

The whorl of expanding red hair was now half way down Isabella's thighs and working its way over her belly. Isabella ripped open her blouse. There between her breasts was the red ringlet of hair. Gringovitch saw it. It must have fallen from the locket. Against Isabella's white skin he could see it was the hair from the painting. The ringlet was cauterizing Isabella's flesh. Without thinking, Gringovitch licked his finger and lifted the ringlet off Isabella skin, as he would remove an eyelash from a cheek. He ran to the fireplace and blew it into the flame. There was a brief flare. He put his forefinger in his mouth. The ringlet had singed his finger.

Gringovitch turned to Isabella. She was unconscious.

When Isabella awoke she was in Gringovitch's bed. He was sitting asleep in a chair next to the bed.

-Anatoly, I am so thirsty. May I have water?

Gringovitch's head jerked as he awoke.

-Isabella, you are alive. You passed out and I couldn't revive you. You frightened the bejesus out of me. I was ready to call 911.

-How did I get up here?

-I carried you. How do you feel?

-Tired, very tired. I need to use the bathroom. Will you help me up?

Isabella sat on the edge of the bed, wrapped in Gringovitch's robe. He helped her stand. She was wobbly and leaned on him. He led her into the bathroom.

-Can you manage, or do you want me to help you?

-I will be all right. There are plenty of things to hold onto. I will call you when I need you.

-Since there is no bathroom door, I will wait downstairs.

Gringovitch was opening a beer when he heard the scream. He took the steps two-at-a-time.

-Isabella!

-My hair! What happened to my beautiful hair?

Isabella was standing naked before the full-length mirror in the hallway. The hair on her head was now a severe short crop and she was sporting a glorious fluffy bush of silken red hair.

-What happened to my hair? Did you cut it?

-No. I swear I didn't. I can tell you what happened, but I can't explain it. It was crazy what happened. I saved the hair that fell off.

-And where's my locket?

-Gone. Again I can tell you what happened, but I can't explain it.

-And what is this, she said pointing to the red scar on her chest?

-Come, sit down and I will tell you everything that happened. It begins and ends with Carl's obscure love of the ringlet.

