

The She-Wolf of Leningrad

by Daniel Harris

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The heavyset blind woman came into the art opening without a dog or a cane. One could tell by the attitude of her head that her ears were on high alert. A slow wave of silence swept over the opening crowd. The owner of the gallery hurried to the blind woman's side.

—My name is Valerie. This is my gallery. May I assist you?

—Don't worry I won't break anything. I'm here to visit the Gringovitch statue *Mother & Child*.

—I can lead you to it. Take my arm.

—Is there a problem?

—No, said Valerie. There are many of obstacles and I wouldn't want you to trip.

—I came here from Mystic, Connecticut, on three trains and a taxi. I think I can find a statue in this room. Please let go of my arm.

—Of course. Would you like to meet Anatoly Gringovitch?

—I'm sure he will discover me. Please, continue with your party.

—Would you like a glass of wine?

—Perhaps later.

Slowly the crowd of attendees resumed their petty talk. The blind woman moved slowly through the gallery. She stopped before each painting and sculpture. Those that paid attention began to doubt the woman was blind. There must be a scintilla of light reaching her retinas that allowed her to make her way.

—She might use echolocation, said an art professor, pompously, as if he possessed some special knowledge.

—That would make her bats, punned his companion, a woman whose attenuated front, back and side profiles were equally desiccated.

When the blind woman reached the statue, *Mother & Child*, she stopped. She carefully reached out to touch it. At first she held her hands an inch from the stature as she sensed its outlines. She moved her hands closer to the statue with each pass of her hands.

—Do you want to touch it? asked a resonant male voice.

—You must be the sculptor, Anatoly Gringovitch.

—Why yes, I am.

—Who is the baby?

—He is my son.

—Who is the woman?

—Why his mother of course.

The blind woman gently ran her hands over the statue.

—This is not metal.

—No, it is a porcelain *bozzetto*, a small-scale model of a proposed life-sized bronze sculpture.

—I am not ignorant, I know what a *bozzetto* is.

—I did not intentionally try to insult you. I'm sorry if you thought I did.

The blind woman continued to massage the statue.

—Do you remember your time in Russia? asked the blind woman.

—Do you mean wartime Leningrad?

—Yes.

—No, I was too young. My family left the Soviet Union disguised as Polish Jewish refugees when I was three. My parents took us to Lima, Peru. A year later we moved to Chicago. My only memories of Leningrad were inculcated by my parents' constant retelling of their odyssey.

The blind woman stepped away from the statue.

—May I touch you?

—Well, yes if you must, replied Gringovitch slightly embarrassed by the request.

As with the stature, the blind woman followed the contours of his face, torso and legs, slowly moving closer, almost touching his clothing. Slowly she touched his belt and moved her hand gently over his genitals.

—Yes, you are the boy.

—The boy?

—Yes, the statue is incorrect. We were all starving. The mother should be me, a skeleton with breasts.

Gringovitch was taken aback.

—Why do you say that?

—Your mother was near death from starvation. I had food. My lover, the father of my dead daughter, was a Soviet artillery officer. We had good Russian bread and soup. I was led to a basement shelter where your mother and six others lived. They were surviving on a soup made from the soles of dead men's shoes and the bones of starved rats. My fruitful breasts saved you as well as others. After the siege was defeated, my lover's unit chased the Nazis back to Germany. Four years later my lover found me shoveling snow in Leningrad. We escaped the Soviet Union and immigrated to Mexico. We married. My husband drove a bus. The humiliation of the new life was too much for his poet's soul. He succumbed to depression and alcohol. My sister's daughter found me in a Carmelite school for the blind and brought me to Mystic, Connecticut, where I now live.

—When did you become blind?

—As a young girl of three. It was the result of disease.

—You make your way so well.

—My ears and my skin are my eyes.

Gringovitch stood looking at the blind woman hardly believing her story.

—How do you know I'm the boy you nursed?

—You have three where most have two.

An embarrassed Gringovitch looked at the blind woman in astonishment.

—You must be my legendary *nyanya*. My parents mentioned you in every telling of their history. They called you the she-wolf of Leningrad. The woman who saved us from starvation.

Gringovitch reached out to the woman to embrace her.

—No, said the blind woman, it is I who embraced you then and I will now.

They held each other tightly, sharing memories of horror and comfort.

