

Resident Artist · *Lucia Nevai*

“OH, I DABBLE—I dabble,” Viola said. “But you must meet Eleanor. Eleanor is our resident artist.”

I was applying a coat of white matte paint to the walls of the former town clerk’s office in Dustin, New York. It was the summer of ’68; the air was hot and still. I had the door open so the paint would dry fast. Viola nearly filled the doorway. Ever since she had found out I was opening an art gallery across the highway from her luncheonette, she had started wearing big arty jewelry over her sleeveless nylon tops.

“Eleanor did a sketch of a cherry tree in bloom which received a lot of attention in our Adult Education class,” Viola said. Her voice was actually getting snooty. “You missed a spot.” I rolled the roller back and forth over the bluish stain, but it bled through. “Given half a chance, Eleanor could be famous,” Viola said arrogantly, almost blamefully. “With you in town, Tamara, it’s very likely, wouldn’t you say?”

“The art business is not that simple,” I said with authority, though I was just guessing—it was all new to me. I would have to be more selective about the half-truths I told Viola. She had wanted to know what I was doing here; I had attributed to myself an ideal, a desire to promote little-known artists in a little-known setting, where art was needed most. I hadn’t mentioned the married man connected to me at all times (in my mind at least) along Route 1, the back way to Wickley. Why else would a girl with long blond hair, a B.A. and \$6,000 settle alone in the middle of nowhere?

“Well is it possible?” Viola whined. She hung there in the door like a giant Kewpie doll, ready to be taken home by the first paying customer. My arm was tired. I cradled the roller in the paint tray.

“It’s possible,” I said.

Twice during the next couple weeks when I went into the luncheonette for a newspaper, I had just missed Eleanor. “She was just here,” Viola would say. “I told her all about you. She wants to meet you.”

“Good,” I would say. “I’d like to meet her.”

Most of the people who came to my first opening, a show of clay masks with Haidan Indian motifs by a guy named Anton from New Jersey, came because they thought the gallery was the annex to the antique store next

door. Viola was an exception. “Eleanor wants to come too,” she said. “But she’s so busy with the farm. And the children—she’s got the eight. I have to keep reminding her that art should come first.”

“Good,” I said. “It should.”

We repeated ourselves a month later at my second opening, a show of wood and straw constructions by a woman sculptor from Woodstock. A few of my artist friends came at my request. Viola, the only local, heard me offer them shows. “Oh you should give Eleanor a show!” she cried.

“Viola,” I said, careful to avoid a sarcastic tone, “I’ve never seen her sketches. I’ve never seen *her*.”

Viola’s face collapsed for a moment. Then she recovered herself. “I will get that sketch to you,” she said. “With or without Eleanor.”

It was November—and cold—the day Viola left the luncheonette unattended long enough to run across Highway 6, throw open the gallery door and shout, “Tamara, we’re set! Saturday! Eleanor’s free!”

Henry, the owner of the antique store was in the gallery warming up with a cup of coffee. He had a knack for appearing soon after I had brewed fresh coffee, made myself a sandwich or opened a box of doughnuts. I began to think he could smell food through the wall we shared, perhaps through the bluish stain. “Bet you I know why Eleanor’s free,” he said.

“Why?”

“It’s hunting season. Her husband’s hunting.”

“So?”

“He don’t like her to go nowheres unless he goes somewheres. He wants her car *in the driveway* when he gets there. You should see them sometimes, trying to beat each other home!” He laughed with glee, as if, being a bachelor, he was getting away with something: he never had to bother laying down the law to a woman. He was an innocent man, and yet what he had described left a cold, clamping sensation in the pit of my stomach, the same sensation I felt when I saw my parents’ life insurance policies side by side—Dad’s life was worth sixty thousand, Mom’s ten.

Early Saturday afternoon, Viola brought Eleanor to the gallery with her sketch. Eleanor wore a man’s old khaki carcoat over a man’s plaid flannel shirt. She was on the tall side and too thin, her eyes deeply sunken in their sockets. “Show Tamara your garnet,” Viola instructed.

“Oh!” Eleanor flashed a wide, spooky smile which seemed to me a dangerous waste of energy given her pallor. She reached beneath her shirt

and pulled out a thin gold heart on a chain. A garnet filled one curve of the heart. "It's different," Eleanor offered.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Did your husband give it to you?"

Viola howled—a lengthy physiological event, her bust and stomach clapping together in great wallops while she helplessly surveyed the ceiling.

"No, I don't think so," Eleanor said.

"I gave it to her," Viola said, wiping her eyes. "Last year."

"For my thirty-third birthday," Eleanor said. She looked fifty.

The sketch of the tree was done in pen and ink, mounted and framed by Eleanor with a wide, powder blue mat. The whole thing was wrapped in Saran Wrap. I held it at arms' length and looked at it for quite a while. Eleanor joined me. She seemed to marvel at her own work, the way a woman would marvel at her sleeping child. It was very, very good. There was something sprightly in the technique that gave the tree life. I told her so.

Eleanor responded with a long rehearsed description of which bough she had drawn first and which rock she had sat on to draw it, and so on through the entire drawing. Her dentures clicked against the roof of her mouth as she talked. I told her to bring in the rest of her work. Her face came to a complete halt. "This is the only one she has matted," Viola explained.

"That doesn't matter," I said. "I don't need a mat to appreciate what I'm looking at." Eleanor seemed unrelieved. I offered them coffee. They hemmed and hawed and then, when they coaxed it out of me, I amended the offer to include white wine. We drank a whole bottle. Viola led a discussion, largely bitter, about men which ended when I told them what I looked for in a man. "Openness and honesty," I said. Eleanor looked at me as if I had said, "Three penises."

We closed by agreeing that we should all do this again soon, but from then on, whenever I saw Eleanor's brown Chevy station wagon passing the gallery, it contained anywhere from five to nine silhouettes and was heading north, home, at full speed. Very often, a slow silver truck chugged by in her wake.

Viola began to talk about Eleanor's show as if it were already on the gallery calendar. I reminded her that I had still only seen one sketch.

The holidays came; I flew to L.A. to visit my older sister, Nora. She

completely disapproved of me and my choices in life, but I had nowhere else to go for Christmas. I wasn't about to sit around in my room behind the gallery, waiting for a fast, hushed, unsatisfying phone call from Wickley while round after round of in-laws, family members and friends filed through his wreath-covered door. It was nice at my sister's place. The beach was warm; the sky was blue. I kept postponing my return flight—I was gone a month. I almost sadistically enjoyed the disappointment, the anxiety in his voice each time a long distance call came from Wickley asking when I was coming back.

"Eleanor's never going to bring the rest of her sketches in," Viola greeted me my first day back in Dustin. "If you want to see them, you're going to have to go over there." We went together.

Eleanor lived in a ranch house that badly needed painting. The front stoop was a stack of cinder blocks. She met us at the door with a hollow light in her eyes. There were nine empty hooks on the livingroom wall with nine pairs of galoshes underneath. On the tenth hook was Eleanor's khaki carcoat. The floor was covered with linoleum. Something smelled of manure. "This is my office," Eleanor said, sweeping us over to an old steel file cabinet which had been painted powder blue.

"Show Tamara the still life," Viola said.

Eleanor pulled out a drawer and thumbed through the files. "Let's see," she kept saying. "Still life. Still life," All she came up with was farm bills. She tried another drawer. I looked out the picture window. The metal mailbox, also painted powder blue, leaned away from the road on its post as if it were shrinking from contact. Eleanor disappeared from the living room. When she returned, she had a violin under her chin and was playing it. Viola and I eventually left.

In April, I put together a group show featuring landscapes in a variety of media by local artists. I included Eleanor's sketch. A reporter from the weekly brought a photographer out to the gallery to give me some pre-publicity. I found myself pointing them towards the cherry tree. Eleanor's art was on the front page.

I hoped the exposure would launch her—in her own eyes at the very least. I called her to see how she felt about it. "Yee-gads," she kept saying as if she were the center of a scandal.

On Sunday afternoon, about an hour before the opening was scheduled to begin, Eleanor parked her brown Chevy wagon across the highway,

facing home. She was wearing an out-of-date two-piece suit, probably an Easter outfit. She looked uncomfortable in high heels. "Look around," I said as she entered, but she seemed intimidated by the expanse of polished oak floor. She pulled a folding chair up to the big display window by the door and sat with her eyes on the highway. I uncorked the wine, laid out the cheese and crackers. Henry came in from next door as if on cue.

"Congratulations!" he said to Eleanor. "You're famous!" She grimaced. He chewed a while. "Where's your husband at?"

"Down to Hapsburg." She cast her eyes south. "Looking at a used harvester."

There was a lull during which I simply stood across the room from Eleanor watching her watch the road. Then everything happened at once. Cars rolled into Dustin and parked along both shoulders of the highway, constricting traffic to one lane. The phone started ringing with calls from people who were lost. I was giving directions to one when I saw Eleanor climb up on the seat of her folding chair in her nylon-stockinged feet and cup her eyes to the window with both hands. "Yee-gads!" she swore. That is my final memory of her. She clambered down in her Easter suit, awkward as a foal, stabbed both feet in her heels and ran out the front door just as a swarm of guests were trying to get in. *Walk*, I want to tell her whenever I remember her, *Take your sweet time*. The silver truck was stuck so long in gallery traffic that before it was able to chug past the window, three different ladies had had time to scan the oils, acrylics and water-colors, and to remark to me their special interest in the cherry tree.