

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 1

by Daniel Harris

1968 Manhattan

Before he was Francesco Martinelli, before a gallery had taken control of his life and marketed him as an Italian-American painter, before he was the painter of large surreal and phantasmagorical paintings, before posters of his paintings filled college dorm rooms, he was Frank Martin, a graduate of Yale's School of Art. His survival skills included handyman, art mover, general factotum and his profession, unpaid, was oil painting. He lived on Greene Street in a semi-abandon building in what was to become SoHo in Manhattan.

After a year as the resident unpaid caretaker of the building's failing infrastructure, Frank's landlord, Hymen Steinmetzinger, asked him to act as the building's super in exchange for free rent. There were two other artists squatting in the building; a husband and wife who had an art restoration business, and a dancer who lived and rehearsed his dance company on the first floor, where he occasionally gave performances. The fifth floor was filled with rusting thread-spooling machines, owned by a thread company now in bankruptcy. Frank lived on the top floor under the aged and leaking roof. Being the most impacted by that failing membrane, Steinmetzinger knew Frank Martin would keep the roof patched. Frank became an expert with tar, flashing and caulk.

Frank was putting out the trash on Greene Street when a truck from Pro Piano pulled up to the building across the street. That building was more upscale than his. Some of its tenants had crafted stylish city mansions out of their generous lofts. He watched as the piano movers lifted two grand pianos onto the sidewalk and then muscled them into the freight elevator. He recognized one of the movers as a guy he had worked with on art-moving jobs.

—Hey, Sean, where the hell are you taking those pianos?

—Frank, said a tall burly Irish kid with a Boston accent. What are you doing here?

—I live across the street.

—Some Japanese pianist is moving into the top floor. I guess she is an artist-in-residence at NYU this fall.

—She?

—Regular Hirohito. Bossy micro-manager, like as if we haven't moved a few pianos.

—Yeah, New York women, said Frank, shaking his head.

—For sure.

Frank never saw the pianist move in, but a few weeks later standing in front of his building, he heard a piano moving through the parallel double octaves in the *finale* of the Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto* at a blistering pace. At first he thought it must be someone playing a recording, but he realized that there was no orchestra, only the piano. He looked up to the top floor of the building and thought that the music must be coming from the Hirohito lady's apartment.

—Jesus, some serious musician! Frank said aloud.

It was one of those sudden summer microburst thunderstorms that dump inches of rain on New York City streets in a half hour, causing flooding and mayhem at most intersections. Frank, loyal guardian of his building, was attired in swimming trunks and hip-waders, raking trash from the roof drains. The water on his flat roof was calf deep. The putrid water was awash with urban debris: dead pigeons & rats, underwear, a tampon, paper coffee cups, beer cans, condoms, banana skins, cigarette butts, as well as sheets of newspaper and paper bags that had been lifted by updrafts onto the roof.

When he had cleaned and drained the roof, he went to the basement and checked that the sump pumps had kept that area dry. They had.

He returned to his loft, showered and made a pot of coffee. He sat in a garbaged Adirondack chair, which was missing a plank, smoking, drinking coffee and studying the painting on the easel. It was almost finished, but there was something missing. This feeling was more instinctual than any learned artistic knowledge.

After the rain, his loft became muggy as the late afternoon sun emerged from behind the clouds and steamed the city in ninety-degree heat. He opened his two working windows. He could hear a piano, it sounded nearby. Looking across the street he saw the Japanese pianist sitting at one of her pianos with her back to him. She was naked. An industrial fan blew her long hair toward the bass register of the piano. She was playing the Brahms *Handel Variations*. Her playing was muscular and precise, yet there was a feminine quality to it. He knew Clara Schumann had given the premiere. Probably Brahms had written the variations for Clara, Brahms's *de facto* lover. The Asian's technique was crystal clear; the notes spoke as individually as marbles bouncing off concrete. The homophonic sections had all the richness of German brass. He stood watching and listening, straining to catch as many of the subtleties as he could over the traffic noise. When she stopped, he watched her stand and perform stretching exercises. Then she walked out of his field of view.

He realized he still hadn't seen her face. Looking at her sitting on the piano bench he was reminded of Man Ray's famous photograph of Kiki of Montparnasse as *Le Violon d'Ingres* with the violin f-holes painted on her back. The Japanese woman's back had the same curves as Kiki's. The voluptuousness of the Asian's curves, contrasted with her slim muscular arms with their compact muscles and tendons. Her elegant fingers, slightly upturned at the ends flew with elegance and accuracy over the keys. In the quiet intimate passages, her nose almost brushed the keys. She would shake her head when her long black hair tumbled off her shoulders onto the keyboard. When she reached the last variation before the fugue, she made the music rise up and over the stew and funk of the city with heroic excitement. Frank had to find a way to meet this woman. How

could he meet her? He was a struggling artist recovering from an ugly divorce without a gallery or dealer. As he listened to her play the majestic fugue, his heart sank. She was a woman out of his class.

Frank walked over to a long table and chose a large sketchbook from a stack of new sketchbooks. He drew a dozen quick charcoal sketches of the woman from memory. He could capture the generalities, but he needed finer details: The angle of a finger, her head, the shift of weight from one hip to the other, the heat of her passion. He would have to observe her more closely. He loaded his old Pentax 35mm camera with a fresh roll of Tri-X, screwed on a 200mm lens and left it on the window ledge. Next time he would shoot photos and draw sketches.

The following day, he looked across the street into the pianist's loft and saw that there were other musicians there. They were rehearsing a trio. The window was closed, he could not hear the music. Again the pianist's back was to him, but she was wearing a white blouse and a dark skirt. He took several photos. Today her hair was in a ponytail. She was less dynamic in her movements, mostly sitting in one position. When she would glance at the other musicians, he was able to snap some pictures of her face in profile. She had a beautiful smile.

A week later, he had shot over four hundred pictures of her practicing. Only one other time was she nude, but he squeezed off five rolls of film; including one where she faced the street and did *tai chi* type exercises. She had an oval face like a Modigliani painting, tweezed eyebrows and full lips. Her breasts were small with large nipples that rode saucily atop the orbs.

Frank filled two sketchbooks with proposed paintings. He colored some of the drawings with watercolor pencils. His sketches were of no Vermeer lady at a virginal keyboard, but a dynamo mastering the nearly five-foot concert grand piano keyboard.

He planned a canvas six feet wide and slightly taller. The pianist would be life-sized in the painting. The bottom edge would be the top of the piano bench. The pianist was leaning backward with her head facing upwards and turned in a three-quarter profile. The

dynamic of the painting was held together by the sensuous curves of her bare back, which gave the painting the sense of motion, her backbone serving as the central armature of that motion.

The illusion was that her upper arms were shoulder-width at the keyboard; but by a trick of lighting and perspective her hands seemed to be moving. Her left hand had just returned from the extreme bass of the keyboard. A portion of her left breast was just visible, and a bass key had not quite returned to its ready position but was still slightly depressed. Her left arm was caught in mid-air and slightly out of focus as if moving at great speed. A mirrored wall captured the left side of her face, neck and shoulders. Her right hand was a blur of movement. It appeared to have just returned from the upper reaches of the keyboard. Her eyes were not closed, but her long eye lashes obscured most of the iris, appearing to concentrate the eyes' focus. One eyebrow was slightly raised, the other had a scowling curve. The entire tableau was a *trompe-l'oeil*, as the piano and pianist appeared to leap off the picture plane.

Frank drew a grid over his final sketch and then put a proportional grid on the canvas so he could scale up the sketch. Without a full sized cartoon, it was exacting work. It took him three days to transfer the drawing to the big canvas. Dozens of photographic prints, sketches and detail studies were pinned to the walls. More sketches and photos littered the long table that ran along the loft's windows. When he saw the outlined picture on the big canvas, he was eager to begin painting. He celebrated his efforts with a beer.

To Be Continued

