

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 10

by Daniel Harris

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After they reclaimed Michiko's handbag and wallet at the police station, Frank rode with her in the cab to Steinway Hall. Leaving Michiko, he took the cab to Macy's. There he bought bed linen, coffee mugs, glasses and plates. When he returned to his loft he went to work cleaning. He was mopping the studio floor when the phone rang.

—Hello.

—Frank, it's me, Michiko.

—Are you okay?

—Yes, but I need your opinion.

—About what?

—Meet me for lunch. Can you be here in thirty minutes?

—I'm pretty grubby. I've been cleaning since I arrived here. An hour would be better.

—Meet me at Steinway Hall in an hour. I'll grab lunch at a deli.

—What's it about?

—An apartment.

An hour and a half later Frank's cab pulled up to Steinway Hall. Michiko and two women were standing in front. They joined Frank in the cab.

—West 81st and Central Park West, said the woman in the front seat.

—Frank, this is Hazel and the woman in front is Petra. Petra represents the Whipple family. They are offering me an apartment in a building they own on 81st Street. Mr. Meyer at my agency

contacted them when I had to move out of my Greene Street loft. They generously have given me a ten-year lease at a quarter of the usual rent.

—Sounds terrific, but are there any strings attached?

—The only string, if you could call it that, said Petra from the front seat, is Michiko will give a solo recital every January at the Whipple family estate in Connecticut. They are magnanimous patrons of the arts, but quiet ones. They give the Philharmonic over a million dollars a year. They also own some rare string instruments, which they loan to winners of the New York Chamber Music competition. When Michiko's agent, Mr. Meyer, mentioned that Michiko needed a safe and secure place to practice and live, they offered an apartment on 81st Street in a building they own. It's across the street from the American Museum. It's in one of those old 1920's buildings that are incredibly soundproof. Perfect for a musician.

—I hope it has been updated since the 1920's, said Frank.

—Oh, my, yes, said Hazel. It was completely renovated two years ago.

—Yes, said Petra. Everything is new in the baths and kitchen. All new plumbing and electric service and the architectural details have been refurbished and restored.

—If it was a first class job, it must have cost a pretty penny, said Frank.

—The Whipple family can afford the best. They are one of the ten wealthiest families in America.

The apartment was everything advertised: three bedrooms, two and a half baths, a large living room, a small library/den, maids' quarters and a large kitchen. The elevator from the lobby opened onto a separate foyer in the apartment, which had closets for coats and boots, as well as a half bath.

—What a beautiful apartment, said Frank. I can't imagine how much rent they want.

—What Michiko will pay, said Petra, is a quarter of the usual rent for the apartment, but the Whipple's wished to support Michiko in her early career.

I imagine Michiko you will put your pianos in the living room. Make sure the movers put coasters under the wheels, you wouldn't want to scratch or mar these beautiful oak parquet floors.

—My pianos don't have wheels, but I'll have Steinway put coasters under the legs. I like the sound of the piano amplified by the floor. So when do I move in? Michiko asked.

—Whenever you wish. I believe move-in can only take place during business hours on weekdays, but as early as Monday. I will have to check the schedule with the building management.

—Can I move in this Monday?

—I'll go check now, said Petra.

—What do you think, Michiko? asked Hazel.

—I'm impressed. It is as nice as my parents' home in San Marino, though not as large but with better details.

—Beautiful, said Frank. My loft is a slum compared to this.

Michiko had to wait until Tuesday to move in. A longtime resident was moving out on Monday.

The Friday after Michiko moved in to her apartment she and Frank were dining in a small restaurant on Amsterdam Avenue.

—Michiko, now that you've moved into your apartment what are your plans?

—I'm a little nervous about the Rachmaninoff with the Chicago Symphony. They are a major orchestra in a city with a sharp-tongued music critic.

—Are you still planning for me to meet you in Chicago?

—Of course, but only for the weekend. I'm too crazy to be around when I'm working with a big orchestra. You should plan on arriving next Friday morning. You will hear the Friday afternoon

performance and the Saturday night performance. Sunday, you show me Chicago.

—Elaine Aster has a reception scheduled for me on that Saturday.

—Can't she change that?

—I don't know. Apparently she has arranged a viewing of some of my paintings for her biggest clients.

—What does *that* mean? Which is more important to you, her or me? said Michiko with some heat.

Frank didn't know what to say. It wasn't like he had a love interest in Elaine. He was totally smitten by Michiko, but he had to follow the dictates of his dealer who was in control of his purse strings for the next five years.

—You, of course, but Elaine pretty much owns me. Don't make me have to choose between my career and you. You know I adore you, but this is my big break. If I screw this up, it could be curtains for me as an artist.

Michiko moved the food around her plate, but didn't eat anything.

—We should go, said Michiko. Peter is coming to rehearse the Rachmaninoff in half an hour. We should be finished by ten.

—What does that mean?

—You can call me after ten.

—I would like to see you. Maybe spend the night.

—Not tonight. We are rehearsing the Archduke trio for the Corcoran at eight tomorrow morning. I take the train to Washington at one.

Frank felt a familiar dark cloud of depression descend on him.

—Well, I guess we are a couple of hot commodities. I will miss you very much.

—I'm sorry Frank, but my career has to come first. It's not like I don't care for you, but this is a critical juncture in my career. If I get good reviews with the Chicago Symphony, Mr. Meyer says that it will be worth another ten or more big orchestra performances. Maybe even a recording contract.

Frank worked hard not to sulk, but that black cloud of depression was poisoning his emotions.

—Waiter, check, please, said Michiko.

—I'll get this, said Frank.

—Thank you, Frank. You know I care about you, but I have too much on my plate this week. When I return I'll make it up to you.

—I will miss you terribly.

Michiko snuggled close to Frank during the walk to her apartment. There was a mist in the air and the Victorian street lamps in the park gave off a yellowish glow like a Van Gogh painting. It was a romantic setting. They embraced across the street from Michiko's apartment. Michiko couldn't bear to make a display of affection in front of the building staff.

—I'm going to miss you, Frank. Think how happy you will be when I return.

—I will miss you terribly.

—I'll call you. I promise.

—Please don't fail me.

—Goodnight, Frank. Be a good boy when I'm gone.

Michiko turned and trotted across 81st Street to her building leaving Frank in front of Theodore Roosevelt Park. He wondered what she meant by being a good boy. Was she going to be a good girl? What was good anyway? When he said, "Please don't fail me," Michiko hadn't responded. That stung. He headed to Central Park West and the downtown subway under a black cloud.

To be continued.

