

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 18

by Daniel Harris

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Michiko went to the powder room at Riverside Church and freshened her make-up. She changed from her concert dress into a snug Burgundy sheath with peek-a-boo slits in the skirt. The deep neckline allowed enticing hints of unfettered breasts. She was dressed to seduce one man: Francesco Martinelli. She had decided to call him that from now on. It was his success name. Frank Martin was fraught with ominous episodes of depression or uncontrolled rage.

She prayed Frank had forgiven her transgressions in Chicago and the nightmarish contretemps with the NYPD. To his credit, Francesco had been very discreet and non-judgmental with her. But she hadn't heard from him since that horrible night in the hospital. Francesco had saved her from her own stubbornness and a serious medical crisis; earlier he had saved her from muggers. She was horrified that the NYPD suspected he was a professional pimp. What the hell did that make *her*? But that nightmare was behind her. She hoped Francesco thought the same.

When Michiko stepped into Elaine Aster Gallery, the atmosphere was electric. Francesco's first solo show was obviously a major moment in New York City art and a big turning point for Francesco. There were almost a hundred wealthy and knowledgeable collectors, as well as art critics and reporters dispersed around three large galleries. People were engaged in animated discussions about the paintings. The gathering was well lubricated by a full liquor bar and haute cuisine canapés and hors-d'oeuvre. A string quartet was

playing appropriate avant-garde music. The reception desk had been moved close to the entrance of the gallery. The Goth girl Frank had spoken to about Shirley Preston was checking invitations and issuing bidding numbers.

—Do you have an invitation? asked the Goth girl.

Michiko produced the invitation she received at her address.

—But this is addressed to Frank Martin. You don't look like Frank Martin.

—It came to my address. Frank Martin is my husband. He is out of town. I am here to see the paintings.

—Oh, I see, so what is your name?

—Michiko. My name is on the front of the envelope.

—I don't find your name on the guest list.

—Is that a problem?

The Goth didn't know what to answer. This woman had a valid invitation and knew how to dress for the occasion.

—Welcome to the preview, Michiko. Here is your bid number. Ask any staff member if you wish to bid on a painting, or would like more information about the process or a particular painting.

—Why, thank you. Do you know where I might find Mr. Martinelli?

—He's here, but everyone wants to see him, so look for the largest throng.

—Thank you, you have been most helpful.

Michiko passed into the exhibit. She immediately attracted the notice of most of the people viewing the paintings in the first gallery. She carried herself with the assurance and bearing of a major musical artist used to accolades. She looked sophisticated and stunning. The string quartet had just finished playing a John Cage string quartet. Michiko had performed with the first violinist and the cellist. The cellist motioned her over.

—Michiko! What a surprise seeing you here, said the cellist, a sleek blonde with cascading locks. What brings you here?

—Francesco is an old friend from when I lived on Greene Street. He rescued me from the muggers.

—Oh là là, said the violist. He's a handsome guy.

—He's a serious artist, said Michiko, and very cool.

—So, are you an item? asked the cellist.

—Maybe, said Michiko blushing slightly. We shall see. So, who hired you for this gig?

—Angelique Brody, said the cellist. She heard us play a concert at Miller Theater and told Elaine Aster that we would be perfect for the Martinelli opening.

—I've seen these paintings in his loft. The Cage string quartet you just finished fits perfectly.

—Thanks, said the first violinist. We've also been playing some Elliot Carter, Morton Feldman and some improvisational pieces. All quiet music, but definitely contemporary like the paintings. Elaine gave us a preview of the paintings when she hired us. She wanted us to select compatible music.

—That sounds like Elaine, a major league micro-manager. Well, I've got to find my man, said Michiko laughing, if that's what he is to be.

—I'm sure he'll spot you with that dress you're wearing, said the cellist. Sexy, Michiko.

—It's not too risqué, is it?

—No, I was only teasing. Go find your guy.

—You're sure this dress is not too sexy for an art opening?

—Michiko, said the first violinist, you're fine.

—Well, play pretty, said Michiko turning to look for Francesco.

Many men caught her eye and gave her smiles as she walked through the galleries. She acknowledged their smiles, but also signaled that she was looking for a special person.

She discovered Francesco in the rear gallery, standing alongside *The Black and The Red: Battle of the Ants*. He was talking to an attentive group of about a dozen people.

—The inspiration for *The Black and The Red* is chapter 12 in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. That book by Thoreau has informed my entire philosophy. *Walden* is practically my bible.

Frank spotted Michiko in the back of the group. He caught her eye and opened his arms. Michiko ran into his arms, her heels

clicking sharply on the marble floor. They embraced. It was at least a minute before they pulled apart. It was a cinematic moment.

The witnesses to this spectacle applauded and one man whistled after Frank gave Michiko a kiss on the mouth.

—Francesco, your paintings are so remarkable, said Michiko in a whisper.

Frank was beside himself. He could barely respond.

—Michiko, you look so glamorous, I'm tongue-tied.

—Francesco, why are you so *thin*? Your eyes and cheeks are sunken. Have you been sick?

—It's been a rough patch. But I'm so happy you could make it to my show.

—Francesco, I've missed you terribly, said Michiko into Frank's ear. Your paintings are more impressive to me now than when I first saw them in your studio.

Frank was perplexed and embarrassed. He was elated to see Michiko, yet he was confused by her affection. She seemed sincere, but could he believe her? She had a spotty track record with him. After all, for chrissakes, this woman drove him into the psycho ward at Bellevue and put him on an NYPD watch list.

—Excuse me, said Frank to the gathering, this is an old friend, the virtuoso pianist, Michiko. Frank knew Meyer Management decided to drop her last name. Michiko had a good ring and was unique to Westerners.

There was a smattering of applause from some in the group who recognized her name.

—And now, on with the tour, said Frank.

Frank resumed explaining his technique in *The Black and The Red*. When he moved on to the next painting, *Orange in a Time of War*, Michiko remained at his side. When members of the audience asked him questions, he gave witty, ironic answers. After he had explained the last painting in the show, he quipped: "I'm not a bad docent, am I?" There was general laughter among the group.

Michiko was impatient to be alone with Frank. She wanted to cement their relationship tonight.

—Francesco, take me home, she whispered in his ear.

—Soon, my dear. I have something to show you, but I must stay here until the preview is closed. Worse, there is a press conference after the show.

Elaine Aster hurried to Frank.

—Francesco, do you know we have multiple bids for all but two of your paintings? she whispered into his ear. You're a success! A bona fide artist. I knew I was correct when I saw your work. We're going to make a lot of money together.

Frank was speechless. What hit him first was this: He was finally an artist who would make his living by painting. He was stunned by this realization.

—Well, aren't you happy?

—Yes, yes of course. But I'm also happy to be reunited with this lady, giving Michiko a wink.

—Frank, remember what I told you, said Elaine with obvious rancor. The women will appear out of nowhere. They are not to be trusted. Artists have groupies just like rock stars. They are trouble. They'll disrupt your life and your art.

—Relax, Elaine, I've known Michiko a long time.

Elaine scowled. She didn't want any woman disrupting her property's work output. Turning abruptly, she rushed to glad-hand some departing guests

—I know Elaine has given you your big break, but I don't like that woman, said Michiko. There's something about her. You're not sleeping with her are you?

—Heaven's no, said Frank. She's hardly my type.

—Well, she is an attractive woman and probably very rich.

—If you can believe what Angelique Brody says, said Frank, Elaine Aster is one of the wealthiest gallery owners in New York City. She might even be top ten or twenty in the world.

—Don't forget, it's your work that will make her even more money. You have to get *your* share of the sales.

—That's what Angelique Brody is for, said Frank, making sure I get my due.

—Well, I don't like her either, but I guess these women are necessary.

—Michiko, you aren't jealous are you? said Frank giving her a smile. Until Elaine Aster saw my work and gave me this chance, I was selling a few paintings a year for a measly \$100 apiece. Now I have a chance at a life as a successful artist.

Francesco's press conference was wincing. Some of the reporters were outright hostile. It wasn't until Rachel Bergman, the curator of contemporary painting at MOMA who had instructed Frank in how to talk about his paintings interceded, that sensible questions were asked. Frank waxed eloquently. He had spent years perfecting his craft and spoke with authority about how he developed his style and his belief in the future of easel painting. It was nearly ten at night when Elaine Aster called a halt to the press conference. Frank was exhausted and sleep-deprived. He hated talking about art. He made art. Talking about art was for critics, academics and drunken wannabes.

Elaine Aster watched Francesco leave her gallery with Michiko. He had his arm around her and she was leaning into his body. Elaine was furious. Now was not the time for her new hot property to fall in love and stop painting for a year or longer. It had happened with some of her artists before. And then came the break-ups with the predictable depression, drunkenness, drugs ... no art or none that she could sell. Who was this Michiko? She would have to investigate.

If necessary she would seduce Francesco. That would fix this problem. She was only seven years older than him. Thanks to expensive cosmetic treatments and daily workouts with her personal trainer, she had kept her looks and figure. She was absolutely more desirable and womanly than that skinny Jap. Elaine didn't like sleeping with her artists, but sometimes it was necessary to keep them in line. It was risky and could backfire, but if Francesco's production declined, she would resort to women's oldest ruse.

To be continued.

