

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 19

by Daniel Harris

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Michiko and Francesco walked the three blocks from Elaine Aster Gallery to his loft. She became anxious when they turned onto Greene Street, the memory of her mugging still vivid in her memory. Frank could feel her tense under his arm. He gave her a squeeze and felt her relax.

—Michiko, are you allergic to cats?

—No, why do you ask?

—I'm baby-sitting Alex's cat. Alex is the dancer who lives on the first floor of my building. The cat's name is Bounder. He's a big fluffy Maine Coon, a playful guy who loves affection.

—Does he like you?

—Bounder loves everyone.

When the elevator arrived at his floor, Francesco asked Michiko to wait outside while he staged his loft for her arrival. He removed Friday night's self-portrait from the big easel and replaced it with *The Nude Pianist*. When he had the studio lights on, he ushered Michiko into his studio.

—Why, that's me, said Michiko, the instant she saw *The Nude Pianist*.

—Yes, my dear, my homage to you.

—Hey peeping Tom, you told me you never saw me practicing nude, she said, giving Francesco a playful slap on the wrist.

—I lied. Are you pleased?

—Pleased? I love it.

—It's my gift to you. You can show your grandchildren what a hot babe you were in your youth.

—Francesco, you are the best. I loved you the day I set eyes on you, the day I was standing on the street in front of my building with those two AC guys.

—And I was smitten then, too. I could tell you were an exceptional woman.

—I was a whimpering wreck the last time you saw me.

—I've forgotten that time. Let's hope there are no more awful times like that

Michiko stood on her toes and gave Francesco a long warm kiss on the mouth. Frank wrapped her in his arms.

—Do you have a bed in this dump? asked Michiko.

—Do you think an almost-famous artist doesn't have a bed? Better yet, it has clean sheets.

Frank was brushing his teeth when Michiko called out to him.

—Help! Francesco. Your cat is attacking me.

—Bounder? He's a love bug.

—No, he's not! He's spitting and trying to claw me.

Francesco walked into his bedroom. Bounder was on the bed puffed up and growling. Whenever Michiko put her hand on the bed, Bounder would hiss and swipe at her with claws fully extended.

—I think he's jealous, said Frank.

—He wants to hurt me.

—Okay, big guy. This woman has space here.

Francesco grabbed Bounder and tossed him into the studio and closed the bedroom door.

—Hold me Francesco.

—Can't I do more than that?

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Francesco lay looking at Michiko sleeping. The sun was above the roof of Michiko's old building. Boulder was curled up between them purring. It was nearly noon. Michiko opened her eyes and smiled at Francesco. She reached out and gently touched his face.

—Look, you have a friend, said Francesco pointing to Boulder.

—That's a big change from last night, said Michiko. Listen to how loud he purrs.

—I told you he was a love bug.

Frank turned on his back, Boulder jumped onto Francesco's chest.

—Uff! Boulder you're becoming a fat boy, said Francesco. I think Alex kept you on a dancer's diet. Since you've moved up here, you've been chowing-down like a starving tiger.

Francesco scratched Boulder's ears and rubbed under his chin. Boulder shifted his motor into high gear.

—Michiko, why don't you call me when you go away? asked Francesco petting Boulder. You have no idea how much it hurts me when I don't hear from you.

Michiko stared at the ceiling. It was a tangle of wires, pipes and ducts. Frank's question had a similar tangle of answers. She didn't want to jeopardize their relationship, but she had to tell Frank the truth. He was a good man, an honest man, and quite possibly he would become a rich man; but he was also a fragile bi-polar man, prone to fits of manic behavior: rages and long periods of intense creative activity. He didn't tolerate anyone interrupting him when he was in full concentration. But then she didn't tolerate interruptions when *she* was working. That they had in common. But his creative episodes might be followed by periods of depression so deep that Michiko wondered if he was aware that anyone else existed.

—When I was growing up, said Michiko, my father was CEO of a Japanese-American engineering firm. He traveled to large bridge building projects all over the globe. He was almost never home, but he would phone my mother every night. Virtually every phone call

ended in a fight. My mother, who was the product of an arranged marriage and lived in an arranged marriage, thought my father was using comfort women. My father thought my mother was cuckolding him.

Many nights, I listened to my mother cry herself to sleep. My response was to become the best pianist I could be. I never wanted to rely on a husband. I was going to be my own woman and escape the bondage of marriage. I would become a trophy above the price of rubies. I would be an unobtainable independent woman.

Then I met you. I fought my feelings. On a whim, I seduced you. You were caring, loving and understanding of my sexual naiveté. That's what I love about you. You can be so caring. But all those years of listening to my mother crying ... over what ... words said in haste over a bad telephone connection ... Jealousies? I never wanted any of that. Francesco, it's even difficult for me to call my agent, I'm so fearful of the telephone.

When I'm on the road, unless I'm performing, I'm lonely. People are afraid of a talented single woman traveling alone. People think maybe I'm a predatory woman, or an Asian whore who wants to seduce husbands with Geisha skills. I don't even know what those skills are, except Geisha's are good musicians and storytellers. The very people who hire me view me as an itinerant pariah. How many times have I held the telephone in my hand hoping to break through my fears and call you? Then the sound of my weeping mother fills my ears and I put the phone down. This phobia of mine is no excuse, and I know you've suffered. It pains me to think how much you've suffered.

Francesco cradled Michiko in his arms. There were no words.
To be continued.

