

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 3

by Daniel Harris

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A week after Frank had installed the air conditioner, Michiko returned to her apartment following a chamber music performance in Princeton, New Jersey. New York City residents were suffering through a blistering heat wave. A thermal inversion trapped the hot, humid, polluted air adding to the misery of the city's occupants. This day was the fourth sweltering day in a row. The night brought no relief. There were rumors of riots and electrical blackouts. In Frank's sparsely populated SoHo neighborhood, the one bar was packed. Many residents sat on their roofs quietly drinking beer, smoking and trying to catch the smallest zephyr. When Michiko entered her apartment, she looked across the street to Frank's loft. She saw that he was painting on a large canvas. She showered, poured herself a glass of champagne and sat nude in the dark watching Frank through her windows. Her apartment was pleasantly cool, thanks to her new air conditioner.

Frank, shirtless and wearing paint splattered denim cut-offs, was drinking beer from a bottle. He would stand studying the painting and then carefully make a few brush strokes. For some reason Michiko found his movements amusing. It was like watching one of those vintage eighteen-frames-per-second films of someone trying to open a stuck umbrella.

Michiko hadn't really "known" a man in a total sexual way. She had tried to have sex with her Julliard boyfriend, but he was not able to perform and later moved in with an older man. She gave up on boyfriends and set her sights on winning a major piano competition.

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She'd had enough petting and groping to make her technically no longer a virgin. Watching Frank's hard body rekindled her dormant sex drive. Frank was handsome and a generous person. She decided to seduce him. She tripped her air conditioner's circuit breaker.

Frank was sitting on his broken Adirondack chair studying *The Nude Pianist*, when the phone rang.

—Mr. Martin, this is Michiko, the pianist across the street. I know it's after one in the morning, but my air conditioner seems to have stopped working. I saw your light on and thought I could call you. Would it be too much to ask for you to come look at it?

—For you anything. But I must warn you I'm pretty grubby and I don't smell too good.

—Do air conditioner repairmen have to smell good?

—I'll take a quick shower and be right over.

Michiko watched Frank drop his shorts and walk to the rear of his loft. When she next saw him he was dressed and hopping on one foot putting on a sandal. Her buzzer rang five minutes later. She buzzed Frank in and then went into her bedroom and donned a red dragon print caftan. She greeted Frank when he arrived at her door.

Frank checked the circuit breaker. It was off, but hadn't been tripped. It occurred to him that maybe Michiko had turned off her AC unit as a pretext for inviting him over. Why? She didn't seem like the type of woman who would invite a man to her apartment for bedroom sport. Even though she had a sexy trim body, she seemed too serious about her career. If anything, Frank thought of her as one of those hard-driving asexual women.

After Frank restarted the air conditioner, Michiko gave him a glass of champagne.

—Come sit on the sofa. It might trip again, she said.

—————
When Michiko awoke, she screamed. There was a naked man sleeping in her bed sporting a big erection. She sat up and pulled the sheets over her body. Frank was jolted awake by her scream and jumped out of the bed.

—What's wrong? asked Frank, looking for something to cover his tumescence.

Michiko stared at Frank wide-eyed holding the sheet around her nude body. Suddenly, she started laughing.

Frank, Frank, I'm so sorry. I forgot you were here. You know I've never slept with a man before. Come back to bed.

They spent the weekend together, listening to music, and visiting museums and galleries. Frank explained paintings to her and she explained music and Zen. They spent languorous hours in bed. Michiko was a quick learner in the pleasures of sex.

Frank made many sketches of her: on a bench in Washington Square park, enjoying an ice cream cone on the Staten Island ferry, and in her loft. He drew her cooking, practicing, dressing, bathing and studying. Now that he was more familiar with her, he knew he had to repaint *The Nude Pianist*. He had made the woman in the painting a machine. Michiko was a real person, a woman with strong and powerful emotions. She was an exceptional person with a quick intelligence and strong grounding in Western and Eastern cultures. She also had an out-sized ego and a micro-management streak, but Frank was happy to be in love. They did not visit Frank's loft. Frank did not want her to see the painting he hoped would be his masterpiece.

The best thing that happened to their relationship after that magic weekend was Michiko's concert schedule. She had concerts scheduled at all the major summer music festivals: Tanglewood, Marlborough, Aspen, Ravinia, Santa Fe and a number of lesser venues. It was a good mix of chamber music and solo appearances. They did not see each other again until mid-September. Michiko never telephoned Frank during that time, nor did she return to her loft on Greene Street.

The more time that passed since that weekend, the deeper Frank descended into an ever-tightening spiral of crushing depression. It was more devastating than during the break-up and dissolution of his marriage. He had tried to show Michiko that he was a worthy and loving partner. But he had deluded himself. What right did he

have, thinking that a virtuoso pianist would find anything more in him than a convenient boy-toy? He took the sketches, drawings, photos and the canvas of *The Nude Pianist* and put them in his storeroom.

He hit the bottle hard, sometimes consuming two fifths of whisky a day. He slept fitfully. But he worked. He worked until he was too drunk to stand. He would sleep it off, buy more whisky and continue painting. He painted dozens of surreal and phantasmagorical pictures. It would be a close race as to whether his liquor bill or his paint bill would go through his meager savings first. Ultimately, those cathartic alcohol-fuelled paintings of his tortured mind would make his early reputation, leading to a gallery contract, fame, and enough money to allow him to bid adieu to handyman jobs and moving rich people's art. But before he sniffed the sweet smell of success, there was the smash-up.

Frank was in a workingman's bar in the East Village drinking with some artist friends. He had already drunk a fifth of Jim Beam at his studio. The Democratic National Convention was on the television. The Chicago police were brutally beating demonstrators. An argument ensued between some of the pro-war blue-collar patrons and Frank's anti-war artist buddies. Punches were thrown. Police were summoned. Frank snapped. He broke a chair over a man's head and began beating anyone and everyone with the leg of the chair. It took five police officers and a shot from a paramedic to subdue Frank.

To be continued.

