

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 31

by Daniel Harris

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* * * Frank opened the door to his loft and waved Gringovitch in. Frank was nervous about showing his modest atelier to Gringovitch who was ten years older and an artist setting record auction prices for his paintings.

—This is a great space, said Gringovitch.

—I wish it had north light, but it works for me, said Frank. Let me turn on the work lights.

—North light is over rated, said Gringovitch.

—Would you like a beer? asked Frank from the kitchen.

—Sure. Do you have any heat in this place?

—I'll bring the space heater from the bedroom.

When Frank returned, Gringovitch was studying the self-portrait Frank painted four years before. Michiko hated it and wouldn't let Frank hang it in their apartment. Frank didn't want Elaine selling it, so he kept it in his loft.

—Can I put this on an easel so I can see it in better light?

—Here, put it on this main easel, said Frank removing a large abstract he was painting for a corporate client.

—This is a hell of a fine painting, Frank, said Gringovitch lighting a Sobranie cigarette.

Frank shook a Camel out of a pack and started to light it.

—Frank, try one of these. No bull shit additives in these.

—What are they called?

—Sobranie.

—Elaine Aster smokes Sobranie.

Gringovitch lit the cigarette for Frank.

—These are good, said Frank after exhaling a long stream of smoke.

—A little expensive, but worth it in my opinion. But getting back to this painting. When did you say you painted it?

—November 22, 1968, the night before the previews of my first solo show at Elaine Aster's Gallery.

—You really captured your bi-polar self. Not to everyone's taste, for sure, but I think it's museum quality.

—Thank you. That's strong stuff coming from someone of your stature. I painted it after a three-week siege of depression.

—I don't think you were depressed when you painted this; it's too complex and deep.

—No, I wasn't depressed, but I wasn't happy either. I'd just taken a lot of shit from most of the guys you met at the bar tonight. I was primed to paint, and I wanted to document that moment in my life, my last day as a starving artist.

—Has your shrink seen this?

—Christ no. I haven't seen her in three years. She would probably lock me up if she saw this painting.

—I don't think so, said Gringovitch putting out his cigarette in Frank's overflowing ashtray. What else do you have? What's this big painting you took off the easel?

—Elaine has many corporate clients. This painting is the first panel of a triptych for a new engineering company that is developing lasers. They're very high intensity coherent lights. I had no idea what a laser was, so I visited the company. Pretty interesting stuff, but way over my head. The three panels will hang in their main lobby. It's a beautiful space with lots of natural northern light, so no worries about fading paint.

—They approved an abstract painting like this? Usually engineering firms are pretty straight-laced. If anything you'd think some abstract engineering drawing.

—The three panels depict in a rather abstract way man's harnessing of light: from fire, to incandescent light, to lasers. Not only did they like it, they took a small section from the laser panel

and made it their corporate logo. Then they hired a metal arts company to make a twenty-five foot tall 3-D stainless statue of the logo. The statue will stand in front of their building. I might actually realize over \$20,000 for the entire project. Good money for me.

—Hell, that's good money for anyone. Not many of my paintings sell for much more than that.

—I read in the *Times* about a year ago that Christie's auctioned off one of your paintings for more than \$55,000.

—I didn't see any of that money. Sarras sold the painting to a Swiss collector for \$5000 in 1963. The old guy died and his estate sold it. In eight years it increased more than tenfold.

—Another beer? asked Frank.

—One more, then I have to get back to the family. I've been away for over a month. Francesca wants time away from the boys. They can be a handful.

—How old are they?

—My oldest son, Dante is nine. Zeno, his younger brother, is seven. Zeno is the brains and personality of the two. I worry about Dante, he might be a latent bi-polar. When did you discover you were bi-polar?

—I was always bi-polar. I didn't realize it was a mental illness until my divorce lawyer had the court order a psychiatric analysis. My younger brother David is much worse than I am. He's hospitalized in California. Our parents' tried to ignore it, so we never received any professional care. My dad thought you could cure anything with hard work. Growing up on a farm, there was no shortage of back-braking manual labor.

—From all the art I see in this room, you still use work as a cure.

—My shrink says art is my cathexis.

—What the hell's that, cathexis. Sounds like Greek to me.

—It's the investment of emotional significance in an activity, in my case, making art. She said it was someone's translation of Freud's term *Besetzung*. Don't ask me how you get cathexis from *Besetzung*, or why I can't have *Besetzung*.

—You know, Frank, there comes a time in your painting life when the physical aspects of painting become second nature. When that happens you find yourself painting emotion or essence, not objects or colors. I've read that Cezanne very late in life would stare at a small space in a painting for hours before mixing just the correct color for one brush stroke. When asked why he painted so slowly, Cezanne grunted something about it wasn't the color of Mont Sainte-Victorie, or the light on Mont Sainte-Victorie, or the oil paint, but the essence of Mont Sainte-Victorie he sought. Yes, it is an oil painting of a mountain, yet it takes your breath away because of the emotion it evokes in the viewer.

—Not that I'm Cezanne, but when things are going well, I don't know what I'm thinking, I'm running on some gut emotional level. I don't even know if I think when I paint.

—Frank, it's pretty obvious from the paintings I see in this room, that you've reached a pretty high level. I predict great things for you.

Frank blushed.

—I'm confident in my painting, I'm not so confident in my mental health.

—That could be a problem. Are you currently married?

—No, I live with the virtuoso pianist Michiko. Her full name is Michiko Mita, but as a virtuoso pianist she's known only as Michiko.

—What's that like? It must be a challenge to have two high-powered artists under one roof.

—Mostly it's good, though when I'm in a bad depressive state, I stay in my studio. Michiko doesn't want me around.

—That blows. Why have a girlfriend if she won't help you when you're down.

—She can't make those sacrifices. She has an incredibly busy schedule. She's either practicing or performing. If there are no interruptions, she'll practice twelve hours a day. Did you ever see my painting of her practicing? It's called *The Nude Pianist*. Here I show you a photo of the picture.

Frank pulled a 12"x12" color print of *The Nude Pianist* from a file cabinet and handed it to Gringovitch.

—Jesus Christ, Frank. This is a fucking masterpiece. Where is it?

—It hangs in the Michiko's office in her apartment. She loves it.

—That's museum quality, absolutely. How big is it?

—Life size.

—Astounding painting Frank.

—You can keep the photo if you want. Consider it a gift. I have a dozen prints. The official photographer at the Metropolitan Museum took that photo. I wish Elaine would hire him to shoot the photos for her catalog of my paintings. She says he's too expensive.

Frank told Gringovitch the story of the painting.

—You're a sly dog Frank. Spying on an innocent young thing and then painting her picture nude without her knowledge. How long have you been sleeping with her?

—Since after the Fourth of July 1968. Almost four years. It was pretty rocky the first year, but now we get along well most of the time. If she has, by her standards, an unsatisfying performance, she can be difficult to be around. But then when I'm depressed, no one wants to be around me.

—Can you paint when you're depressed?

—I've tried, but there are no good results. I wish I could paint myself out of depression, but I can't. It just has to run its course.

—That's a bummer.

—Worse. Sometimes when I come out of a depression I'm afraid my whole world has collapsed during my absence. So far that hasn't happened, but it could be in the cards. One of the big issues between Michiko and me is Elaine Aster and Angelique Brody. She wants me to fire them both. She is convinced they are stealing from me.

—Elaine maybe, but whatever you do, don't fire Brody. You are lucky to be with her. She'll sort out the non-payment issues. Trust me. Nothing good will happen to you if you leave Brody.

—Why?

—All the other agents will suspect that you were cheating Brody, or some such chicanery. You'll be poison. You're probably making good money, so don't rock the boat. When your contract is up with Elaine Aster, Brody can find you another gallery, or draw up a better contract with Elaine.

—I hear you, but Michiko is making my life miserable at home over the unpaid paintings.

—Listen, Elaine is selling your paintings and giving you a monthly retainer. That's actually pretty sweet. How much is the retainer?

—\$1500 a month.

—Nice. How much is your rent for this place?

—I was the super, so I lived here free. But I met the new owners of the building today and they fired me as super and are going to start charging me \$1500 a month rent.

—That blows. What are you going to do?

—Look for another loft. With luck I might find another building where I can live rent-free as the super.

Gringovitch shook his head.

—Good luck my friend. That's going to be tough. Real estate in this town is crazy. Half the city is being abandoned and the other half is unaffordable except by the wealthy.

—I'm pretty confident. I can afford to stay here at least until my contract with Elaine is up in 1974. After that, we'll see.

—Well, I've got to get home. Listen it was great to finally meet you and see your work. Good stuff. Really good stuff. I wouldn't despair if I were you. And thanks for the photo of *The Nude Pianist*. That's a masterpiece. That painting could put you in the history books.

—You're too generous. Let me put the photo in an envelope with some cardboard so it won't get damaged. Do you want to borrow a coat? We're the same size. I don't want you to freeze on the way home.

—I'll be fine. I'll just walk over to Broadway and grab a cab. Come visit my studio in Brooklyn.

—I'd love that. When?

—Here's my card. Call the lower number, it's the phone in the studio.

—Thanks, I will. Let me take you down in the elevator. It can be finicky in weather like this.

When they arrived at street level, Gringovitch gave Frank a big bear hug.

—Keep painting Frank. You're going to be big, sooner than later.

—Thanks Gringovitch.

—You can call me Anatoly. It sounds funny you calling me by my family name and me calling you by your given name.

—Thanks, Anatoly. Safe home.

—Good night, Frank.

To be continued.

