

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 4

by Daniel Harris

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He arrived at Bellevue hospital in a straight jacket bound to a gurney. He spent five days sedated in detox. A female psychiatrist, Dr. Andrea Jawarski, was assigned to his case. Frank was embarrassed and ashamed of himself as he blurted out his insecurities and phobias. Dr. Jawarski warned him that if he broke down again, she would recommend electro-shock therapy. While Frank was an in-patient, Dr. Jawarski obtained Frank's permission to visit his loft and examine his paintings. She hoped by studying Frank's art, she might gain insights into her difficult patient. His paintings confirmed her suspicions about Frank's bi-polar condition, but also revealed to her that he was a major talent, maybe even a genius. She didn't see any paintings that looked like the work of a depressive, but as Frank admitted, it was difficult to paint when he was depressed. All the paintings she saw were wild and energetic. Unlike the withdrawn and shy man who was Frank, his paintings reached out to the viewer, demanding engagement.

After two weeks, Dr. Jawarski signed Frank's release papers on the condition that he would continue with his psychotherapy and refrain from alcohol. He walked from Bellevue to his loft. Freedom never felt so good. The stinking, dirty, gritty city was bucolic compared to the suffocating confines of the schizo ward where he had spent the last two weeks. It was eleven-thirty in the morning when he arrived home. The elevator was broken. He smiled to himself; he had a job for the rest of the day. A faulty relay, he

thought, and he suspected which one it was. Then he remembered. Con Edison had shut off his electricity for non-payment. He had jumped the power from the elevator to his apartment so he could light his studio and make ice for his whiskey.

When he reached his loft, the door was open. A trim handsome middle-aged woman was standing near the windows holding one of his paintings. She wore an expensive suit that flattered her slight frame. Gold-rimmed glasses framed quick intelligent eyes. She radiated energy, chutzpah and toughness. She looked vaguely familiar to Frank.

—Who are you? Why are you in my studio?

—Hello, Frank. I'm Elaine Aster. I own Aster Gallery on West Broadway, she said handing Frank her business card. Maybe you've heard of it. Your doctor, Andrea Jawarski, called and said I should see your paintings. She told me you were being released today and asked if I might visit you. You and my gallery share a landlord, Hymen Steinmetzinger. He let me into your studio.

Frank's mind was still muddled from medications and therapy. The long walk from Bellevue hadn't cleared his head. He wondered if what was happening was real, or if he were in Bellevue dreaming, or maybe dead. He took her card and put it on his drawing board.

—Yes, now I remember you. You spoke to my painting class at Yale a few years ago.

—Do you want to show me your paintings, or should I look through them by myself?

—Sorry? I'm still a little fuzzy.

—Would you show me your paintings?

—Of course.

Over the next three hours, Frank showed Elaine his work. At first he was reluctant to say much, but he eventually became more animated. Some of his reticence was from seeing paintings that revealed how far he had gone off the tracks. While Elaine used his bathroom, he glanced over at Michiko's loft. He saw men washing windows and women cleaning. A piano technician was working on

her pianos. Maybe she was returning to New York, more likely, she was moving or subletting. There was a Pro Piano truck in front of her address. She must be moving.

When Elaine rejoined him, they continued looking at his paintings. Elaine arranged them into three rows: first class paintings, almost first class and good. There were over eighty paintings: medium size highly detailed works and large emotionally charged abstracts six feet on a side.

Elaine pulled six of the large first class paintings and studied them alternately on Frank's big easel. She stood smoking and staring intently at the pictures.

—Do you have more light in here? asked Elaine.

—Sorry, said Frank who ran to the rear of the loft and flipped a circuit breaker flooding the loft with powerful daylight quality lighting

—Much better, she shouted to Frank.

Frank Martin was the real deal. Elaine was impressed by the paintings and the sheer quantity of work accumulated in the loft. The man might be crazy, but he could paint.

—All these sketchbooks and paintings in the back are yours, too?

—Yes. I burned all my student work, except for one painting my teacher at Yale wanted. Everything you see I painted in this loft.

—How long have you been in New York?

—Three years.

—You have been busy.

—Yes. I have a good life for painting, few responsibilities and plenty of time.

Elaine selected some of the medium-sized pieces. Altogether she set aside twenty paintings.

—Frank, I want to take you under contract. I'd like to hang these twenty paintings in a solo show in November, also I want to option all the paintings in this room and all of your new work for the next five years. I'm willing to pay you a monthly retainer and fifty percent of the final retail price for all pieces sold through the gallery. The

gallery will cover all expenses. Looking at what's here, I can almost guarantee you fifty thousand dollars a year. That includes a fifteen hundred dollar monthly retainer. You will of course be expected to produce a significant number of new paintings every year.

—You're catching me at a difficult time. But I believe you told my class at Yale a few years ago that 50 percent of the gross selling price was usual. There may not be anything left of the net retail price after expenses.

Elaine bowed her head and grimaced.

—Well, she said blowing a stream of smoke toward the ceiling, they didn't dull your mind at Bellevue. How's forty percent of the gross? You're going to make a lot of money, young man.

—Do I have to decide now? Can I tell you tomorrow?

—Yes, come to my gallery in the afternoon. But don't stand me up. I'd like to put up a solo show of your paintings in late November. I should be able to sell all of these paintings. Unless you have an objection, we will change your name. It can be a "Do Business As" name. You can use your real name for your private life if you prefer.

—Could I ask you for a cigarette? They wouldn't let me smoke in the hospital.

—Of course. She passed Frank her pack of Sobranie cigarettes and her jeweled custom-made lighter.

Frank lit the cigarette and sat down in his Adirondack chair. He closed his eyes and took a deep drag. His head was spinning. Yesterday at this hour, he was yelling at Dr. Jawarski, terrified he would have to go crazy to paint again. Now a strange woman was offering him security, money and possible fame. The flip-flop of fortune was so fast and so extreme, his previous mood swings seem glacial. Aster's offer was confusing his idea of who he was. She was throwing money at him to make art. How would that change his life? He was comfortable just getting by each month, living from job to job and occasionally selling a painting. His needs were simple: paint what he wanted and live by his wits and skills he learned growing up on the family farm. This woman's offer could be good news, or a train wreck. Did he want a patroness? What else did she want from

him? Would she demand he sleep with her? She would practically own him. He needed time to think this over and for sure, he needed to know more about her.

Elaine watched Frank. She could practically see his thoughts. Poor man. How did this amazing painter emerge from a Wisconsin apple orchard? On the surface he appeared a handsome dark Scotsman from the upper Midwest. But behind those penetrating eyes lurked fantastic and atavistic visions. Hymen Steinmetzinger told her Frank was a big happy-go-lucky farm kid who loved to fix things and help people. Andrea told him he was a bi-polar genius trapped in a tradesman's mentality. What was the source of the visions that created these astounding pictures?

Finally, Frank stood and turned to Elaine.

—I need a drink.

—You're not supposed to drink, you know, but let's have one drink and an early supper. My treat.

To be continued.

