

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 5

by Daniel Harris

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When the cab dropped Frank at his address at seven that evening, he noticed the lights were on in Michiko's apartment. He didn't want to announce to Michiko that he was home so he left his lights off. At least Elaine did not ply him with alcohol. He had only one martini and a glass of wine. The meal was the best he'd eaten in months.

He didn't recall where he put the clean sheets for his bed. He remembered he'd done his laundry before he went to the bar that night where his troubles started. Elaine had arranged his paintings in his loft into a maze making it difficult to negotiate in the dark. He dreaded looking across at Michiko's apartment, but he couldn't help himself. She was playing the piano. A tall elegantly dressed man was standing conducting next to her. He said something to her, then sat at the second piano and began playing, talking to her at the same time. The man conducted with one hand or with head nods while playing the second piano as Michiko played the solo part. Frank, who had little knowledge of the classical music world, didn't know what they were doing. It looked like some professional situation, but he didn't know how classical musicians worked. They could have been whooping cranes courting so synchronized were their movements.

—Fuck it, he said.

He turned on the lights, found the sheets and two bottles of beer, made the bed and lay drinking beer, smoking and thinking about his good fortune in art and bad luck in love. Did he have to suffer mind-wrenching emotional trauma to make good art? If he did, it would

kill him. He had asked Dr. Jawarski how he could make good art without being crazy. She had no answer.

After he graduated from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, he worked as an illustrator for a Chicago advertising company. He hated it. At night he made, what his first wife called, creepy abstracts in their Chicago basement apartment. He applied to the Yale School of Art, which was a graduate school. After a summer of proving his worth at Yale's Summer School of Music and Art at Norfolk, Connecticut, he matriculated in easel painting.

He must have dozed off because he was awakened by the telephone and the smell of smoke. One of his sheets was on fire. He ripped it off the bed and tossed it in the shower, ran and answered the telephone.

—Frank?

—Yes?

—This is Michiko.

—Michiko, where have you been? I have so much news for you.

—Frank, put on some decent clothes and come to my apartment. I want you to meet a famous orchestra conductor.

—Sure, sure. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. I have to put out a small fire.

Frank hung up and ran into his bathroom. He turned on the shower dousing the smoldering sheet.

Looking through his clothes, he realized he didn't own a good shirt, tie, or jacket, only jeans and a pair of old heavy wool hunting pants that were too big. He put on his best jeans and a wrinkled but clean blue work shirt.

Michiko answered her apartment door and motioned for Frank to enter. When he stepped inside, Michiko threw her arms around him and gave him a kiss on the mouth.

Frank didn't know what to think or do. He forgotten how soft and sensuous her lips were. Her breath smelled of rose hips.

—Frank Martin, I would like you to meet Maestro Carlo Silvestre, said Michiko pulling Frank around the corner of the entryway into her front room. I am playing the Rachmaninoff *Second Piano*

Concerto with Maestro Silvestre and the Chicago Symphony in two weeks. He is in New York and wanted to rehearse the concerto with me.

—Pleased to meet you, said Frank overwhelmed by the authority, grace and kindness radiating from the man. Silvestre's handshake was firm and reassuring.

—Michiko tells me you are a rising superstar in the Downtown New York City art scene. My wife and I collect contemporary art.

Michiko was telling a famous orchestra conductor that I'm a rising superstar. Where did she get this? he wondered. She's never seen my work except for the sketches I made of her that one weekend.

—I think I should hire Michiko as a publicist, said Frank with a smile.

—Michiko tells me you live across the street. Perhaps I could look at some of your work tonight, said the maestro. I'm booked on the first flight to Chicago tomorrow morning.

—Well, of course. My atelier is a bit of a mess. My dealer was going through my paintings today.

—We shall go, said Silvestre with the authority of an orchestra conductor.

—Michiko, said Frank, you better change shoes. We'll have to walk up to the sixth floor, the elevator is out of service.

—You can catch your breath here, while I turn on the studio lights, said Frank when they reached the landing to his loft.

Frank ran to the circuit breaker panel and turned on the studio lights. He pulled the burned sheet out of the shower and the scorched one off the bed, and put them in a metal garbage can full of empty whiskey bottles.

—OK, said Frank opening the door to his loft and making a sweeping gesture for Michiko and the Maestro to enter.

—Walk around and look, said Frank. If there are paintings you wish to see, I will pull them out for you.

—Why don't you give us a show, said Maestro Silvestre. I like to see how an artist presents his work.

—There are eighty paintings here, said Frank. I will pick out twenty. How does that sound?

—I think twenty is as much as we could absorb in one sitting, said Michiko.

Frank presented the twenty that Elaine had chosen. After presenting each one, he arranged them around the studio so Michiko and Silvestre could study them more closely.

Frank could tell that Michiko was blown away. Silvestre, a reserved professional, didn't reveal much, but seemed impressed, if not by the quality of the work, then by the quantity of work.

—Who is your dealer? asked Silvestre.

—Elaine Aster. But we haven't signed a contract yet.

—She's very good, but a shrewd businesswoman, with a somewhat questionable reputation for her treatment of her artists. You will need a good counselor and advisor to negotiate a contract with Elaine Aster. Give me a piece of paper, I'll give you the contact information for Angelique Brody, the best art lawyer I know.

Frank handed Silvestre a battered Moleskine notebook he used as an address book. The maestro took an elegant Italian fountain pen from his jacket pocket and wrote the name and telephone number of the contact. He returned the notebook to Frank. Silvestre's penmanship was beautifully calligraphic.

—Remember to tell Angelique Brody that I recommended her.

—Yes, sir. I can't thank you enough.

—Would you be interested in selling me this painting, Silvestre said pointing to one of the large paintings. It reminds me of a dream remembrance of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and Picasso's *Les Mademoiselles d'Avignon*. It skillfully combines realism, cubism and surrealism with the élan of action painting.

—I'm not sure. Elaine has options on all of these pictures.

—When you speak with Angelique Brody, tell her I would like to purchase this painting before it goes over to Elaine. I will match any offer Elaine makes plus a thousand dollars.

Frank was dumbfounded. Michiko was beaming. The maestro offered a hand.

—Deal?

—Deal, said Frank, shaking the great man's hand.

—You are going to be a major twentieth century artist young man.

Back at Michiko's loft, they celebrated with a bottle of champagne. Maestro Silvestre's car arrived at midnight to take him to his hotel.

—Well, I guess I should be going home, said Frank. It's been a long day. Sometime I'll tell you about it.

—The only place you're going is my bed, Mr. Martin, said Michiko. Do you think I haven't longed for you the last two months? I've missed you terribly. You have no idea how lonely the life of a traveling virtuoso is, especially if that virtuoso is a woman.

—But, you never called me.

—I was testing you. I wanted to see if you would go sulk and drink. You didn't. You made art. You have passed.

If she only knew, thought Frank.

—————
They sat on Michiko's bed with the sheet pulled up to their waists. She was drinking tea while he enjoyed an espresso coffee. When he awoke, he'd ridden his bicycle to the Village, bought fresh biscotti, stopped at his loft and retrieved his espresso coffee pot, coffee and returned.

—My poor Frank, said Michiko nearly in tears. You were actually in a straight jacket in Bellevue?

—Yes, I had worked myself into a nervous breakdown. I painted over eighty paintings while you were gone and I was in hospital for two weeks.

—Somehow I knew something was not right at home.

—Woman's intuition, said Frank.

They embraced, falling back on the bed.

—Are you calling Angelique Brody this morning? Michiko asked.

—I guess. I'm supposed to see Elaine Aster this afternoon.

—Do it, because Maestro Silvestre will question me closely about you when I see him in two weeks. Don't forget, he very much desires that painting.

—What's your schedule? Am I going to be without you for another two months?

—I have some master classes at NYU, chamber music to coach at Julliard, a Saturday night concert at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington and then off to Chicago for Rachmaninoff.

—Sounds like more lonely nights, said Frank.

—Oh, no. I'll be here every night until I leave for Washington next Saturday. Then you are coming with me to Chicago.

—Do we have money for that?

—Frank! Don't worry. I make plenty and you're going to make even more. I'm concerned about dressing you.

—But I'm a poor artist.

—Not any more, you're not.

—Give me a real hug and then I have to practice. Go paint more masterpieces. But you must telephone Angelique Brody *now*.

—I'm a little nervous about that. Maybe later.

—Frank. I said *now*! Her eyes startled him with their intensity.

—Okay. My address book is in my studio.

—I'm going to call you in fifteen minutes. You better tell me what Brody says.

—What is *your* telephone number?

—Go in the front room; pick up the phone and dial 958. There's a pencil and pad of paper there.

Frank did as told. He wrote down the number. He walked into the bedroom. Michiko was putting on a skirt.

He folded her warm slim frame in his arms and gave her a big smooch.

—You make me so happy, he told her.

—Don't disappoint me, Frank. You call Angelique Brody *now*.

She caught and held his eyes. A big smile broke out on her face.
—Before you ever call me, look out the window to see if I'm practicing or rehearsing. I unplug the telephone during those times. Better yet, I'll call you. Now go telephone Angelique Brody. Don't let us down.

To be continued

