

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 7

by Daniel Harris

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Frank kept looking over at Michiko's loft. No lights. No signs of activity. He couldn't remember if she had a concert tonight, or was giving a master class. He hoped to take her to a fine restaurant, but it was now after ten. He put the two hundred-dollar bills in his cash envelope and took out a ten-dollar bill. He would have a sandwich and a beer at the Maple Tavern.

His entrance into the bar brought cheers and hearty welcomes from his friends. He ordered Bass ale and a chicken club sandwich. Word of his trip to Bellevue must have gotten around. A few of his close friends made consoling remarks. It would be fun to tell the locals about his good luck, but he was terrified that he would get drunk and end up in Bellevue again.

—Frank, sorry to hear what happened, said one of his classmates from the Chicago Art Institute, putting his arm around Frank. Are you going to be OK?

—Yeah, I'll be fine. I'm working on the elevator in my building. I got to get back or there will be endless bitching tomorrow morning.

—Be careful, there's a lot of power coming off that DC generator, said his friend Jimmy, a sculptor who worked part time for an elevator company.

—I've fried a few screwdrivers. I'm sure it's a sticky relay with this humidity.

A part of him wanted to jump on the bar and scream: "I've made it! I'm rich!" The terrifying memory of the straight jacket and the

humbling scenes in Dr. Jawarski's office was too vivid, too recent. Those memories quashed his enthusiasm for celebration. His bohemian pals would discover his good fortune soon enough. Then, as often happened to those who tasted success, the backbiting and jealousies would begin. He could count on it. He was happy for another night as one of the neighborhood guys.

He loved the camaraderie of the artists and musicians in his neighborhood. They competed, but also complemented each other. They stole each other's ideas, partners and even lofts. It was a brotherhood, whose only membership requirement was to be authentically pursuing a career as a creative artist. He saw the successful ones move away, returning less and less frequently as their stars ascended.

Being well known, keeping up, engaging in the one-upmanship of success, was a serious job. Some, after a few lackluster years gravitated to university or art school teaching. Some, through dint of luck, talent, perseverance and hard work, managed to keep their name in the news and their art in the galleries. Frank was sure that the ones who left in triumph and the ones who gave up and retreated from the scene, didn't miss the freezing nights, or sweltering summer days. Once departed, they soon forgot the unrelenting dirt, noise, vermin, winos, drug addicts, and the thieves who seized upon an inattentive moment.

Looking across the room, Frank saw two young college girls enthralled by Rod Stickins, a legendary local Lothario who seduced young women for his personal pleasure and as models for his *outré* erotic paintings. Rod was a successful artist who made very good money, yet still lived the Bohemian life in the 'hood. He owned a small non-working farm upstate, and retreated to it for most of the summer. Maybe he could have an arrangement like that. If Aster and Brody's predictions were even close to accurate, he could afford a getaway home.

Frank worried that money would take him away from all that he knew best and (somehow) even loved and required. He wanted to stay connected to this creative beehive, but what about Michiko?

Did she and he have a future, or was the cultural divide too deep? She came from a wealthy family. Her father was a millionaire businessman. He was the son of a Door County, Wisconsin apple farmer whose yearly struggle to survive depended on blights, bees, weather and capricious consumer tastes.

Michiko was tough and confident. She had an unswerving single mindedness about her career. He had just escaped the nuthouse, but the miasma of depressions and insecurities had not been extinguished there. Those dark forces lurked in the closets and baggage of his psyche. He had to be careful. He had to keep upbeat.

It would be wonderful to share his success with Michiko. He cautioned his weary mind not to project that hopeful scenario. He was relieved that Elaine's people were taking away the paintings tomorrow. He knew some of those paintings were excellent, maybe museum quality, but they were a constant reminder of the malignant spirit that had crept out of the whiskey bottles and cross-fired the synapses of his brain unleashing the terrors, fantasies and hallucinations he so expertly put to canvas. He reminded himself that fear and terror was still resident in his brain like a hibernating Grendel waiting to wreak havoc on the mead hall of his psyche. What Viking or Scotsman had put the darkness of such despair in his genes? Or was it the unremitting dark cold gloom of the Wisconsin farmhouse of his youth, or his parents' chronic fatalism? The confusion of uncertainties made his head hurt. He needed fresh air.

It was eleven-twenty on the bar clock, which was fifteen minutes fast. He considered buying another beer, but remembered there was one bottle at home. He paid the bartender and walked out into the cool air of the Manhattan night.

When he turned from Prince Street onto Greene, he heard a woman scream. Startled, he saw what looked like two men mugging a woman. The cab she had just exited sped down Greene Street.

—Christ! That could be Michiko, said Frank under his breath.

He ran down Greene Street. He didn't shout, but ran at the three people as fast as he could in his work boots. As he neared them, he saw the woman *was* Michiko. From somewhere deep inside, he

uttered an atavistic Celtic war cry. One of the men immediately fled down Greene Street with Michiko's handbag. The other held a knife to her throat while ripping Michiko's blouse. Without hesitation Frank ran at the knife-wielder, pulling his knife arm down and away from Michiko, and driving the assailant into the sidewalk. The knife slid into the street. Silently and ceaselessly, Frank pummeled the man. Finally he could hear Michiko's distressed shouting.

—Frank! Stop. For the love of god, stop! You'll kill him!

Frank stood up. He kicked the man in the groin with his heavy work boot.

—Do you have your key? asked Frank, panting.

—Yes.

—Go into your apartment. I'll find your purse.

—No Frank, it's not worth it.

—Just go.

Michiko skirted the moaning attacker and was turning her key in the lock when a police cruiser pulled up, lights flashing.

—There some trouble here? asked the cop over his loudspeaker.

—This man tried to mug my neighbor, said Frank still panting. An accomplice ran down Greene Street. I think he turned toward Broadway.

The two officers left the car and looked at the moaning man.

—A familiar face, said the older cop. Get up!

—He tried to kill me, said the man still on the ground doubled up from the kick.

—Well, he failed, said the bigger cop pulling the man to his feet.

The big cop put the mugger in a hammerlock, walked him to the prowl car, frisked, and cuffed him.

The man was moaning from Frank's pummeling and now from the pain of the hammerlock.

—Pal, you picked the wrong target this time. You'll be a guest of the city tonight.

A crime in progress call came into the police car. The younger officer answered. We're holding a suspect can't respond.

When the perp was cuffed in the rear seat of the cruiser, one officer took a statement from Michiko and the other from Frank. While they were engaged in that, another police cruiser pulled up with the other mugger.

—Looks like they caught the other perp, said the officer taking Frank's statement.

Michiko identified the other man as the accomplice.

—So now what do I do? asked Michiko.

—It's difficult, said the older policeman. If we had witnessed the assault, we could charge them. Since we didn't, it's your word against theirs. If you wish to press charges, you will have to come to precinct one police station and file a complaint. We can hold them tonight, but by noon tomorrow they will be back on the street. Or you can choose not to file charges. It's your call.

—Just get them out of my sight, said Michiko. Look, I was attacked, and *I* have to press charges? Where's the justice in that? *They're* the ones who should be punished. They broke the law. They robbed me. That one ripped my blouse.

Michiko turned and stomped into her building. Frank looked at the policemen. He could hear sneering laughter from the knife-wielder in the cop car.

—He doesn't sound too contrite, said Frank.

—They never are, said the cop.

—I'm worried he'll come back and seek revenge.

—We'll keep an eye on him. This isn't his usual turf. He prefers drunken tourists in the Village. I don't think he wants to tangle with you again. He certainly doesn't want to see us again.

Frank was baffled. How could the police be so nonchalant about a knife-wielding mugger? Probably they dealt with hundreds of muggings a year. Their rationale: no blood, no big deal. But what if he had stayed at the Maple Tavern and had another beer. He would not have been on the street when Michiko screamed. The outcome might have been tragic, perhaps career-ending for Michiko, maybe rape or murder.

—Aren't you going to take the knife? It's right there in the street.

—If your friend is not going to press charges, there's no need to enter it into evidence. However, since she may change her mind, we'll take it.

The police took some photos of the knife and then, using a chopstick from their carryout Chinese dinner, carefully slid it into a plastic evidence bag.

—If you search the street, I'm sure you'll find your friend's purse and wallet. The perp probably threw them under a car or in a trashcan.

One of the policemen from the second car approached Frank. His nametag said Lewis.

—I'll help you look for your friend's purse and wallet. I'm pretty good at finding these things.

Frank and Lewis walked down Greene Street. Lewis had a large powerful flashlight. They spotted Michiko's leather handbag under a parked car.

—I thought I saw him turn down Spring Street, said Frank.

—Probably not. He would want to run against the traffic. I bet we find the wallet on Broome. We collared him at Broome and Lafayette.

They found the wallet in a trashcan at the corner of Broome and Broadway. There were no bills in the wallet. Everything else was there.

—I'll give them to Michiko, said Frank.

—That's my job, said Lewis. How do I know you'll give them to her?

When they were a block from Michiko's building, Frank saw a limo pull away from her building and speed down Greene Street. It had darkened windows. Frank couldn't see the passengers. When Officer Lewis rang Michiko's buzzer, no one answered.

—She'll have to come to the property clerk's window at the precinct station, 16 Ericsson Place, to claim her wallet and purse, said Lewis.

—I should see her later tonight or tomorrow, said Frank.

—I'd trust you, but regulations are regulations. Is there anything else I can do for you? If not let's call it a night.

—I guess not, said Frank. Thanks for your help. He gave Lewis a perfunctory nod and crossed Greene Street to his building.

When Frank arrived at his loft, he turned on his drawing board lamp and collapsed on his bare mattress. His hands were sore from beating the mugger, his heart was racing from adrenaline overload.

He hoped Michiko would telephone him when she saw the light.

When his heart calmed down, he thought about all the changes he'd been through the last two days. Was he going to be rich? Was he really an artist on the cusp of fame? Could he make art without being crazy, drunk or both? Could he trust Angelique Brody to look out for his welfare? How badly would Elaine Aster take advantage of him? She pocketed \$6,000 for the painting she sold Silvestre for \$10,000. What a fucking rip-off. She did nothing except make two phone calls. The painting was twenty feet away in his studio. *He* made the painting and she collected \$6,000.

He did some calculations: if he made \$5,000 on each of the 80 paintings, he would make \$400,000. Angelique said Elaine Aster would make two million from his paintings. He could live on \$400,000 for the rest of his life. Would he keep painting if he made two million? Of course! That's all he knew. It was his identity and his life. Even depressed, he sketched compulsively, sometimes filling a hundred pages a day. For sure, he wasn't about to take over the family farm.

When would he see Michiko again? Did Michiko see something scary and wild released in him when he was beating the mugger? Was she frightened by his fury? He was there to protect her, but apparently it backfired. Why the hell didn't she telephone? Where *was* that woman?

To be continued.

