

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 8

by Daniel Harris

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The telephone awakened Frank at seven the next morning. He ran to the phone, hoping it was Michiko.

—Frank, this is Elaine Aster. It's Thursday, moving day, remember? Did I wake you?

—I'm afraid you did, but it's okay, I should be up.

—The warehouse people are arriving in an hour to crate and take your paintings. Is the elevator working?

—Not yet, but I can have it working by the time they arrive.

—Good. I want you to make sure they wrap every painting in plastic sheeting and then inactive foam before they crate them. The numbers on the tags, which I put on the paintings, should be on the inside *and* outside of the crates, as well as your name, the title and date. Don't forget your name is *now* Francesco Martinelli.

—You forget, I sometimes work as an art mover. I know the drill.

—I'll send Dennis over with the inventory, labels and packing list. You remember him from yesterday. He'll help you. But they are *your* paintings, make sure the job is done correctly and nothing is damaged.

—Yes, yes. I'm glad you're sending Dennis because I may have to leave for a short time.

—I'll visit you later today. It should take them most of the day to crate all your paintings.

—Thank you, Elaine. It will be nice to have my entire studio space again.

When Frank hung up, he phoned Michiko. There was no answer.

He showered, made coffee and removed the jumper wires that routed the elevator electrical supply to his apartment. When he tried the elevator it was cranky. He rode it to the basement and sprayed contact cleaner on all the relays. The elevator worked perfectly.

He walked out on the street. A long box truck pulled up in front of his building.

—Does Francesco Martinelli live here? asked the driver's helper?

—You're talking to him.

—Can I park here, or will I get a ticket?

—It's a loading zone. You're okay.

—There's another truck coming with crating material. He'll park behind me.

When the other truck arrived, it backed down Greene Street so that the rear of the second truck faced the rear of the first truck.

—That's for convenience and to make it more difficult for a thief to snatch a painting, said the driver of the second truck, which was full of crating materials.

The movers would bring down the paintings. They would put them in the second truck where four men would wrap them and crate them. When a painting was crated, it was put in the first truck. By ten o'clock they had only crated six of the large paintings.

—It will go faster when we do the smaller ones. We have some prefab crates for them, said the foreman.

—I hope so, it's supposed to rain tomorrow. I wouldn't want to be doing this in the rain, said Frank.

When lunchtime arrived, the warehousemen took a break. The craters kept working.

—Do you guys want me to buy sandwiches or something? asked Frank.

—When we're half done, we'll take a break. We have a big job in Connecticut tomorrow, and we *must* finish here today. We'll need both trucks again tomorrow.

—I have a five-gallon thermos I can fill with water for you.

—Hey man, that would be great. Thanks.

Frank put all the ice in his tiny refrigerator in the thermos and filled it with tap water. When he arrived back on the street, he saw a Pro Piano truck parked half on the sidewalk across the street. His heart sank. It was the same crew that had moved Michiko's pianos four months previously.

—What's shaking? Frank asked his friend Sean, one of the Pro Piano movers.

—We're taking the pianos out of Hirohito's loft. Seems someone attacked her on the street last night. Her manager wants her out of this neighborhood. I guess she's too high-class a commodity for this lowbrow street.

—Where are you taking the pianos?

—They're going to Steinway.

—Do you know where she is?

—Nope. The manager's people told us nothing. Just take the pianos to Steinway Hall on 57th Street.

Shortly after Pro Piano left, a moving truck arrived and emptied Michiko's loft of all her furniture and belongs. The movers told Frank they were taking her stuff to a warehouse.

Frank's heart was in his stomach. It must have been Michiko in the limo last night. He wanted to get drunk, but he had to supervise the removal of his art. He couldn't screw up. It was his income for the next five years or longer. He kicked one of the rear tires on the crating truck.

—Damn. God damn it to fucking hell, he yelled.

—Francesco, what's wrong? asked Elaine Aster, approaching Frank on Greene Street.

—Nothing and everything. A woman I was sweet on was mugged last night and has now left the neighborhood.

—Francesco, don't worry. There will be many women, I assure you.

—But she is special.

—All women are special at the time. Then they get bossy and greedy. They're all going to want your money. Mark my words. Be careful.

Frank looked at her quizzically. What's *her* agenda, thought Frank.

—Francesco, don't look at me like that. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. So where are we here? How many paintings are ready to go?

—At last count they have finished forty. They say it's going faster with the smaller ones because they have prefab crates.

—I hope so, they told me they would be done by five tonight and it's already almost one now.

—Excuse me, Ms Aster, said the foreman, but we have forty-six finished.

—So you should make it by five.

—If at four o'clock it looks like we won't finish by five o'clock, we'll wrap the remainder and crate them at the warehouse.

—Remember numbers one through twenty must be delivered to my gallery. I hope they are not in the front of the truck. I want them delivered to me *today*.

—No, I put those paintings aside in the hallway inside the building. You worry too much, we do this every day.

Elaine must have called the storage company, a van with four more workers and materials arrived forty minutes later. The job was finished by three-thirty. Dennis and Frank signed the receipt and waved them goodbye.

When he entered his loft, the studio area was empty. Only his easels, drawing board and worktable remained. He remembered that he'd better pay Con Edison or he'd really be in the dark. He took both of the hundred dollar bills Angelique gave him and ran to the subway. He made it to Con Edison minutes before they closed. He paid the \$75 he owed, plus late fees. He had to make a hundred dollar deposit, but the clerk assured him that his service would be restored by six that evening. Of course it wasn't.

When he entered his loft again, he checked his money envelope. He had a twenty-dollar bill, a ten, two singles plus fourteen dollars change from Con Edison. I better get rich soon, he thought, a big invoice from Bellevue will arrive any day.

—So much for being a wealthy artist, he said, his voice echoing in the now empty studio.

He looked out the window to the other side of the street. Michiko's loft was dark and empty. As darkness descended on his loft, he checked his refrigerator. There was one warm beer. He drained it in three gulps.

—So much for a cocktail at the tender hour of twilight, he told the empty beer bottle.

Frank collapsed on his bare scorched mattress. He sobbed. His children, as he called his paintings, were gone, and the only woman he cared about was gone. Loneliness put him to sleep.

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He awoke when the refrigerator started. He opened his eyes to find all the lights except his studio floodlights were on. He looked at his watch, it was ten-thirty at night.

He needed something familiar and trustworthy, and he was hungry. He went to the Maple Tavern and ordered a plate of pasta and a beer. He also bought two packs of Camels. A girl who sometimes worked as a waitress and artist's model, sat with him while he ate.

—Frank, you seem really distant lately, not yourself. Did they do something to you at Bellevue?

He looked into her face. Her eye make-up and lipstick were too heavy and the wrong color. She had hazel eyes and short blonde hair. He couldn't remember her name. Mary, Maureen, Miranda, Melissa...some M name.

—Let's just say, I wouldn't want to repeat the experience.

—They didn't zap your brain did they?

—They told me next time, like a fucking threat.

—How awful, Frank..

—Any day you go to a hospital in a straight jacket is not a good day.

Frank lit a cigarette and looked at the girl. He could take her home, but he knew her so well as the waitress at the Maple Tavern that it would be like sleeping with a sister.

—Michelle, said the bartender. Anna needs to leave now. Can you work for her?

Right, remembered Frank. Michelle. That was her name. Why couldn't he remember it? He'd known her for almost three years. Those bastards at Bellevue did zap his brain, but with drugs.

—Sure, Stewart, said Michelle, anything to help out a friend.

—No days off for the wicked, said Frank.

—How would *you* know I'm wicked?

—It's just a saying. You're like a sister to me.

—Thanks, Frank.

Frank gave Michelle the money for his bill and followed Anna out the door. Anna was older than Frank. Her sculptor husband was one of Frank's buddies.

—Good night Anna. Safe home.

—You too. No fights with muggers tonight.

Frank walked over to Broadway. NYU students jammed the sidewalk. There was a club on Spring Street that was a favorite music joint for the student crowd. Frank didn't like crowds of people, though it could be stimulating to be jostled by young female flesh in a crowded bar.

He went in a deli and bought two six packs of cold Schafer beer in cans and returned to his loft.

He opened one beer and put the rest in the refrigerator. He looked in vain for some cloth he could use for a sheet, but only found rolls of expensive canvas. If it got chilly, he had a blanket and a sleeping bag. There was no heat in his loft.

—No smoking in bed, Frank announced to the room.

He sat in his studio with the lights off, smoking, drinking, and looking across at Michiko's former loft wishing he could see her practicing. Shortly after one, it started to rain. He opened a window

and smelled the odor of cold rain on hot asphalt. It was a soft early fall shower, not hard enough for Frank to worry about clearing roof drains. You could walk all night under an umbrella in a rain like this and not get wet. He had done that many sleepless nights during his great depressions. He could hear the swish of tires on the wet Broadway pavement.

He had just opened his third beer when the phone rang.

—Hello?

—Frank Martin?

—This is he.

—Carlo Silvestre calling.

—Yes, Maestro Silvestre. What a surprise. What can I do for you?

—I understand there was an incident on your street last night.

—Yes, two men tried to mug Michiko.

—She tells me you were a hero.

—Not really. I was only trying to protect a national treasure.

—I'll be brief. First, I will honor our deal and pay you the \$1,000 we agreed on.

—You don't have to do that. I was furious that I wasn't able to sell the painting directly to you. I would never have charged you that much. You are a friend.

—No, I'm a man of my word. I know Elaine Aster took advantage of you. Angelique told me there was nothing she could do without jeopardizing your contract with Aster Gallery. Second, you will need a paper and pencil.

—I'm sitting at my drawing board.

—Here is Michiko's telephone number. She wants you to call her.

Frank took down the number and read it back to Silvestre.

—Perfecto. Now call Michiko, she's waiting for your call. And Frank, thank you for painting such a wonderful picture. Good night. I'll hope to see you in Chicago.

—You are most kind, Maestro, Frank said into the dead line.

Frank dialed the number. It rang once and then there were a number of clicks.

—Hilton Hotel, said a female voice.

It was not Michiko's voice. Frank was taken aback.

—I'm trying to reach Michiko Mita.

—I'm sorry, that line is restricted. Would you like to leave a message?

Frank didn't know what to say. He hung up.

To be continued.

