

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 12

by Daniel Harris

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Frank was happy to leave the art show and take the train back to SoHo. He was going to pass by the Maple Tavern without stopping, but changed his mind and entered.

It was too early for the regulars. He sat at the bar.

—Hey Frank, said the bartender giving Frank a fist bump. What'll you have?

—Give me a shot and a beer.

—I thought you told us you weren't supposed to drink hard stuff anymore. Are you sure you want a shot?

—Just one. Then I have to go meet some people for dinner. I'll trust you to kick me out in fifteen minutes.

The cheap bar pour burned on the way down, but within minutes he felt like Frank again. He sipped the beer and ordered another shot. The bartender gave it to him.

—You've only got five more minutes, Frank. This is the last shot.

Frank knocked back the shot, drained his beer, paid up and walked to his loft.

He felt much better. He decided not to go to the Chinese restaurant.

Sitting outside his building was the cat who belonged to the dancer on the first floor.

—Bouder, what are you doing out here on this mean street?

Frank bent and scratched the cat's ears and back. The cat purred and rubbed Frank's leg.

—Okay, boy. It's inside for the two of us.

Frank let the cat in and took the elevator to his loft. He looked in the refrigerator, removed a beer and a leftover cooked hamburger. He didn't bother to reheat the hamburger, but covered it with catsup and ate it cold. He found an unopened small bag of potato chips and added them to his menu.

—I sure would like a pickle, he said to the lowering gloom in his loft.

He checked the refrigerator, no pickles. He looked in the old picnic cooler he used as a roach proof pantry. Ah, an unopened jar of pickles.

—A complete meal, he said aloud, protein, carbohydrates and a vegetable. Mother Martin would be proud.

He sat smoking, looking out at Greene Street. He wished Michiko still lived across the street. So far, she hadn't let him stay overnight at her 81st Street apartment. He hadn't been in her apartment except to help move furniture. After the mugging, she never wanted to see Greene Street again. Apparently she was upset with him for attending his art preview this afternoon rather than her concert tonight in Chicago. He would have preferred to be with Michiko in Chicago. That had to be why she refused to call him. He guessed their relationship was over. Too bad Oriana Morosini had to leave for London. Now there was a woman worth pursuing. I wonder how we would converse? I guess I'd have to learn Italian.

The telephone rang. He looked at his watch, 6:15. It must be Elaine. It was an hour earlier in Chicago. Michiko never talked to anyone before a big performance, not even the other performers.

He should finish *The Nude Pianist* before he lost all interest in the painting. He retrieved it from his storage room along with his sketches and photographs. When he had it set up in the good studio light, he opened another beer and sat in the Adirondack chair studying the painting. He realized that making Michiko a softer less forbidding figure was a mistake. She was a cool calculating

performer. The concentration on her face when she was practicing a difficult technical passage was intense and totally focused. She would toss her head for dramatic effect in performance, but while practicing, she was riveted to the task.

He scraped off where he had made the changes and repainted the picture. The more he worked on the painting, the more he saw areas that needed improvement. When he had the figure correct, he realized there was no musical emotion in the picture. One thing for sure, Michiko was musical. He sorted through his sketches and photographs until he found postures that were more rhythmic. He had to change the color scheme, there wasn't enough movement in the colors. He entered his zone of total concentration.

When he was finished, it was light outside. He looked at his watch. It was almost ten in the morning. He turned off the lights, took a shower and went to bed.

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Sunday morning, as Frank was going to bed in New York, Michiko saw her scratch marks on Mikhael Hadda's back as he walked naked from the bedroom into the bathroom. They had been students together at Juilliard. Now he was a section cellist with the Chicago Symphony. She had drunk too much champagne at the reception after the final concert and had agreed to go with him to his home in Evanston. He had ravished her. Giving her sexual experiences she never knew existed. She was totally sated. Every orifice had been fondled, licked, probed and violated. She drifted back to sleep.

—Michiko, I hate to wake you, but I have a children's concert this afternoon. You will have to get dressed and leave with me. I'll take you to your hotel.

Standing in the shower Michiko realized that she was very sore in unfamiliar places. She probably would be for a few days. She longed for a leisurely bath. When she was toweling off before the mirror, she noticed something on her neck. It was a big ugly hickey. She was horrified.

—Mikhael, why did you give me a hickey? You know I have master classes to give. How can I appear in front of those students with a hickey?

—Don't get mad. Wear a scarf. It will go away in a few days. You liked it at the time.

—I'm furious with you. Only a pig of a man does this to a public figure like me.

Neither spoke during the drive to Michiko's hotel.

—Will I see you later?

—Absolutely not. How could you leave a mark like this on me? Michiko said pointing to the hickey. I'm changing my reservation and returning to New York this afternoon.

When Michiko arrived at her apartment in New York it was nearly midnight. She never considered telephoning Frank. That night she dreamt of Mikhael Hadda.

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Tuesday morning Frank sat in Dr. Andrea Jawarski's office in Bellevue Hospital Annex.

—Frank have you been taking your lithium?

—No. I don't like how I feel when I take it.

—That's not good. You need to stabilize your mood swings.

—I can't be creative and take that drug. It messes with my nervous system, makes my hands shake and I piss all day and night.

—I see you didn't get the blood test I ordered.

—I stopped taking the lithium, so there was nothing to test.

Andrea tapped her pen on her desk. Her desk looked like a clinical model of an obsessive-compulsive's desk, nothing was out of place

—Frank, I really have to insist you take the medication. You're part of a special trial for this drug. We know it takes time for your body to adjust to it, but you will have a much more stable emotional life.

Frank looked at Andrea's hands. They were right out of a Goya grotesque.

—Have you been drinking?

—Only beer. I limit myself to one six-pack a day.

—You know I recommend you don't drink any alcohol.

—Look, Dr. Jawarski, I appreciate that you are trying to help me, but I'm a creative artist. I can't put my brain and emotions under chemical lock and key. If I can't create, there is no reason to go on. And as far as alcohol is concerned, I'm just more myself with it. A few beers relax me and they reduce my anxiety. Alcohol frees me from my uptight Scots-Norwegian roots. It opens my mind.

—Elaine Aster tells me you're going to be a famous, wealthy artist. How are you going to handle that? Get drunk and destroy bars? Or go into a black funk and try to kill yourself? If you end up here in a straight jacket again, the doctors will recommend electro-shock therapy. Please, think about this...it's serious, Frank.

Frank wondered how a woman could be as unattractive as Andrea Jawarski. Frank observed that there was not one feature of Dr. Jawarski that was feminine or appealing. He always thought of women as the beautiful side of life. He was embarrassed that he had broken down so completely in front of such a woman. For Frank, her only redeeming feature was that she introduced Elaine Aster to his paintings.

—When is your opening at the Aster Gallery?

—The Tuesday before Thanksgiving. There are special previews the weekend before.

—Do you still see your pianist friend?

—No, she broke off our relationship. I have not seen her since she went to Washington last week.

—That's only a week, Frank. I'm sure she will contact you.

—I think not. Michiko is a very strong-willed person. I was suppose to meet her in Chicago this past weekend and attend her concerts with the Chicago Symphony, but Elaine Aster scheduled a preview of my paintings at the warehouse where they are stored. I couldn't go to Chicago. Michiko considered that disloyal. She never

telephoned me, though she promised me she would. I am devastated. Twice she has gone out of town and not contacted me. I think I'm doing well this time keeping myself under control.

Frank stood and began pacing. There were a number of handheld puzzles on the window ledge. Frank picked up one that involved five pieces of round shot that had to be put in five holes on a tilting disk.

—I love this puzzle, said Frank holding it up to Dr. Jawarski. I can do this every time in less than a minute. Watch.

Frank solved the puzzle in less than thirty seconds.

—That's good, Frank, said Jawarski condescendingly.

—I'm sure I couldn't do it on lithium. My hands would shake too much.

Frank approached Jawarski's desk. He put his hands on the desk and leaned in, his face not a foot from Jawarski's.

—Do you remember I asked you how I could be a painter without going crazy? *You didn't have an answer.* Do you have one *now*?

Jawarski clasped her hands on the desk.

—Well? What's the answer, Doctor Jawarski?

—Frank, I know how to keep you from going manic and then sinking into those deep depressions. Take your medications.

—I can't think on those pills. They squeeze my brain into jelly. I can't create. I'm a vegetable on those meds. And they fuck up my sex life.

—Did you have sexual problems with your pianist friend?

—No. We had primo lusty sex. But I'm like a frozen person on lithium. When I'm with people, it's like I'm watching a film, I'm not part of the scene. I can't even *smell* people, for crissake. How can you fuck someone you can't smell or taste? My hands shake like I have Parkinson's and all I can get is a weak old man's hard-on.

Frank was sweating. He took a red bandana from his rear jeans pocket and wiped his forehead.

—I can prescribe different medications, but they have worse side effects. Lithium is the drug we know will help your form of manic-depression.

When Frank left Jawarski's office, he vowed to never see her again. He was so furious he kicked an empty garbage can across 28th Street.

To be continued.

