

# The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

## Chapter 14

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Frank left Michiko's building and walked into Central Park. It was a rough day. He sat on a bench and watched two dogs chasing a Frisbee thrown by a tall skinny hippie.

His day began with that bulldog Dr. Jawarski hounding him about taking his lithium. Had *she* ever taken the drug? Did *she* know how it turned you into a shaking, pissing vegetable? She was clueless about the mental concentration it took to paint. He could not convince her that the lithium numbed his brain. *This* was a caring professional? Give me a break. What a travesty of the Hippocratic oath.

Then, after suffering abuse by the medical system, his so-called girlfriend decides to ditch him, won't even talk to him. She's probably got another boyfriend stashed somewhere. He thought about getting absolutely blotto, but the consequences were onerous. He decided to walk to Pearl Paint on Canal Street. He needed paint and canvas. The walk would burn off his frustration and anger.

When he went to check out at Pearl Paint, the clerk told him he had an overdue balance of \$79.65. He took cash from his wallet and paid his past due and another \$127 for his current purchases.

—You know, Mr. Martin, you can charge today's purchases. You don't have to pay cash.

—As long as I have the cash, I might as well pay my bill.

—Whatever you want. Did you sell some paintings?

—Actually, I did.  
—Congratulations.  
—Thanks. Can you make a more compact bundle of my purchases. I'm walking to my studio.  
—Sure. Let me get some twine and handles.

When Frank arrived at his building, Bounder, the resident cat, was meowing to get into the building.

—Bounder, what's with your master, Alex, leaving you outside on the street?

—Meow.

—All right buddy, inside you go.

Bounder joined Frank in the elevator and followed him to his loft. There was a note taped to Frank's door.

*Frank, My favorite Super-*

*Sorry to spring this on you at the last minute, but will you take care of Bounder? I'm going to Europe for three months. There's food in my loft in the kitchen. You have the key. Thanks a million. I owe you, man. Alex.*

—Bounder, welcome to your new home, said Frank, holding the door for Bounder. Don't get too comfortable kitty-cat, it's only temporary.

Frank went to Alex's loft and found Bounder's bowls, food and cat box. When he returned, Bounder was on Frank's bed sound asleep.

—Well, pal, we're roommates for the next three months. Don't get any idea about a long-term relationship.

Bounder purred and kneaded the wool army blanket.

—Bounder, I'm sure there's some great people smells on that blanket.

Frank opened a beer and turned on the bright studio lights. On the big easel was *The Nude Pianist*. He sat in his Adirondack chair studying the painting. Sometimes he would stand and inspect a small section very closely. After an hour of thought and inspection, he declared it finished. He put it in his storeroom to dry, packed all the sketches and prep materials in an empty beer case.

He spent the remainder of the day building stretchers, stretching and gessoing canvases. Most successful artists trusted this work to assistants, but Frank hadn't actually realized success yet. Also, he was very particular about his formula for gesso and how it was applied. He liked the canvas to be as smooth and resistant to the brush as a wood panel. For most of his smaller paintings, he used wood panels.

At seven, he showered, dressed in clean jeans and plaid flannel shirt. He walked to his favorite Chinese restaurant on Pell Street for a well-deserved dinner. The restaurant was a family business. Peter Chang was the chef, his wife Lili oversaw the modest dinning room and took delivery orders. Their daughter Iris served as the waitress and their two sons Alan and Harry helped in the kitchen and delivered food.

In hard times, Frank had swapped small paintings for meals. Tonight, Lili Chang pointed Frank out to one of the restaurant customers who was admiring one of those paintings hanging in the small dinning room.

—He like painting, said Lili to Frank. He buy.

The painting was an impressionistic view of New York Harbor in a winter fog. It was from a period when Frank was making paintings similar to Turner's late atmospheric works.

—I wouldn't sell it Lili. In a few months, it could be worth much more.

—We split money fifty-fifty. He pay \$100.

—You don't like the painting?

—You need money, yes?

—Not today.

—Okay. Painting no sale.

Evidently, the New York Chinese grapevine discovered that he had been incarcerated in the nut ward at Bellevue. Lili Chang wouldn't let him pay for his meal. The family was very solicitous and wished him the best of health. When he left, they gave him a fish head for Bounder.

—If I'm so fucking crazy, why is it all the peripheral people in my life love me so much? he asked himself. What's the matter with Jawarski and Michiko? Fuck both those bitches.

After he returned to his building, he decided to visit Aster Galleries. The gallery was open, but there were no visitors. A model-thin black-haired girl dressed in full Goth: black leather top, black leather mini-skirt, black patterned stockings, black engineer boots, was manning the gallery. She wore oversized horn-rimmed glasses.

—Good evening. May I help you? she said. She stood and walked around her desk so captivated by Frank's good looks that she caught her knee on the edge of the desk. She stopped to see if she had run her stockings. Frank copped a good visual of her when her mini-skirt rode up her slim hips.

The girl couldn't believe such a handsome man would be visiting the gallery at nine o'clock on a Tuesday night. From his attire she thought he might be an artist. She could tell from the smell of his clothes he had come from a Chinese restaurant.

—Maybe, said Frank, shaking her proffered cool hand. Can you explain these paintings to me?

—Of course. Are you a collector? Artist? Do you know Shirley Preston, the artist whose works are on display?

—No, I'm new to the art world. I'm visiting New York and wanted to learn about recent trends in the New York art scene.

—You're in luck. I'm a free-lance curator in contemporary New York art.

She led Frank from painting to painting, spending time explaining the artist's political and artistic agenda.

—I'm not sure I understand the crude painting technique Miss Preston uses. Is it, how do you say, *au courant*?

—Easel painting is dead, said the Goth. This is Preston's reaction to formalistic school painting. It's raw emotion expressed in paint. Women have been barred from painting schools for centuries. This is her answer and rage at that discrimination. As the artist herself says, "Kiss my brush, male chauvinist pig. Here is raw emotion in paint."

—Interesting, said Frank eyeing the upward creep of Goth's skirt. Is Miss Preston the only artist you are showing?

—At the moment yes, but I can show you one painting that will be on display in November. It's by Francesco Martinelli, an amazing Italian artist currently living in New York.

—If it's not too much trouble, I would like to see that painting.

—Let me lock the door, I'll take you into the back room.

The Goth locked the front door, put up a "Back in Ten Minutes" sign, and led Frank to the back room.

The painting she showed him was the one Maestro Silvestre had purchased.

—Wow! That is an incredibly vibrant painting, said Frank suppressing a grin.

—Yes, Martinelli puts the lie to the death of easel painting.

—How do you explain that? I thought you told me easel painting was dead.

The girl rubbed her hands together and tugged down the hem of her mini-skirt.

—Well, Signore Martinelli is the exception to the rule. He is a genius. Elaine Aster discovered him on her last trip to Rome. She was blown away when she saw his work. His paintings have power, surface and motion, as well as an emotive force that incorporates facets of the entire history of oil painting from the Renaissance to the Abstract Expressionists.

—Interesting fellow.

—But, very reclusive. Elaine Aster says he is a bit of a clown after a glass of wine. One can see that humor, as well as the phantasmagorical in his work. He also loves optical illusions and *trompe l'oeil* as you can see in this painting, which fuses tropes of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and science fiction genre graphics. Notice how he incorporates Botticelli's exquisite symbolic figurative painting with Picasso's cubism. The cubist scallop shell appears to push the bathing nudes into the viewer's arms.

—That's wonderful stuff.

—Yes it is.

—But it seems like a long way from Ms Preston's paintings. This is so informed and skillfully executed.

—But his paintings *don't have a political message*. Preston's work is all about *politics* and about the disenfranchisement of women by the male dominated world.

—This is all very confusing to me. I thought art should represent the best examples of human creativity. You know, beauty and all that.

—This is the 1960's. The world is changing. Deconstructionist theory is the champion of the oppressed and underrepresented. You are looking at Ms Preston's work with tired old white male eyes.

—I'll have to think about that.

—I must reopen the gallery. Elaine Aster would be upset that the gallery is not open.

—I hope I didn't get you in trouble.

—Oh, no, she said, removing the sign from the front door and opening it.

Frank walked around the gallery looking at Preston's paintings. "What a bunch of garbage," he thought. He noticed the price tags were in the \$2-4,000 range.

An expensively dressed couple entered the gallery and stood studying one of Preston's paintings.

—I think this is a powerful painting, said the man.

—Not to my taste, said the woman scanning the gallery for a painting she might actually enjoy.

The Goth girl approached the couple.

—Hello and welcome to Elaine Aster Gallery. May I help you?

—Can you explain what this painting is about? asked the woman.

—This painting has many levels. On one level, it's about the subjugation of women by men. On another level, it's about the power of pure paint to express emotion, in this case *rage*. An unseen assailant is torturing the woman depicted here. The choices of color and brush strokes create tension in the image. The heavy impasto indicates conflict. Ms Preston is a genius at depicting the state of women in the world — politically, sexually, socially.

—All that is in this painting? said the woman in disbelief.

—I can see that, said the man, giving his wife a patronizing smile.

—Yes, it's all there. Shirley Preston is very articulate about her work and her work clearly articulates the terrible place women inhabit in our present world and, in fact, throughout history.

—I see this painting is priced at \$4,000. Would you accept less?

—You would have to return when Elaine Aster is here. I'm not allowed to make sales. If you want to purchase the painting tonight, I can telephone her and ask her to come to the gallery. She lives a short cab ride away.

—We can return tomorrow.

—Should I put a hold on this painting?

The man and the woman looked at each other. It was clear the woman didn't want the painting, but the man did.

—What time do you open tomorrow? asked the man.

—We open at noon, said the Goth.

—We'll return after lunch, said the man.

—Would you sign our guest book? said the Goth. You will receive invitations to exclusive previews and other gallery events.

—We're from Cleveland, said the woman, Shaker Heights, to be specific. So I doubt we could attend any events.

—You have a wonderful museum in Cleveland.

—Yes, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Cleveland Orchestra are our contributions to world culture, said the woman.

—We hope to see you tomorrow.

—Oh, we'll be back. I really like that painting, said the man. Any chance we could meet the artist?

—I would have to ask Elaine. Shirley lives three hours upstate. If you want to meet her, I can telephone Elaine and ask her if Shirley can be here tomorrow afternoon.

—I would like that, said the man.

—Let me telephone Elaine now.

The couple returned to the painting the man was considering buying. The more doubtful the wife was, the more elaborate were the man's arguments for purchasing it.

—Excuse me, said the man to Frank. Do you have an opinion about Shirley Preston?

—Weeeeell, said Frank drawing out the word and stalling for time. I don't particularly prefer her style of painting, but I can see that there is a lot of thought that goes into her work. Many of today's artists have forsaken traditional painting skills for crude graffiti-like styles. For them the painting is only a vehicle for a political argument.

—What a wonderful voice you have, interrupted the woman. Do you sing?

—Only in the shower, or if I'm snookered, said Frank appraising the woman, who had all the trappings of a trophy wife except for her face, which was too equine to be beautiful.

—You seem to know your art, said the man.

—Thank you. I took some art history courses in college.

The Goth girl approached them.

—Good news. Shirley Preston will meet you in the gallery at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

—That's perfect for us. Thank you for arranging it, said the man.

—I'll be very interested to see Ms Preston, said the woman.

After the Goth escorted the couple from the gallery, Frank approached her.

—Tell me, said Frank, how much would the painting in the back room fetch.

—Oh, that's a \$15,000 painting, probably more, maybe thirty grand.

—That's a lot of money. More than I can afford.

—Between you and me, a famous orchestra conductor purchased it. For reasons of confidentiality I can't tell you who bought it or the price paid, but it was huge.

—Well, I'm no famous person, only a poor farm boy from Wisconsin. I guess my tastes in art exceed my wallet.

—Well, a Preston painting is a good investment. You might double your money in less than five years.

—But I don't like her painting technique, nor her subject matter.



—Well, sir, it's a good investment. When her career takes off, and it will, her paintings could be worth a great deal in ten years. Her early painting, *Stripped Woman Crucified*, sold at auction for over \$6,000. The seller bought it for \$200 three years ago.

—That's impressive. With that kind of growth, the painting in the back room could be worth \$100,000 in five years.

—Could be.

—Well, thank you. You've been most helpful.

—Would you sign our guest book? You will receive invitations to our openings and special events.

—Sure.

Frank signed the guest book as F. Martin. He gave his address as C/O Michiko Mita, 42 West 81st Street, 10024.

To be continued

