

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 17

by Daniel Harris

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Friday night in Little Italy is a big night. Frank decided to eat at the Italian Garden. The owner "Big Tony" Fabio, recognized Frank as a regular, greeted him cordially, but said Frank would have to wait for a table. A trio of women about Frank's age overheard this and invited Frank to join them. Frank ordered a bottle of Chianti for the table. It helped break the ice.

The women, all from Chicago, wanted to see a real New York artist's work space and maybe meet some local artists. That wasn't what Frank had planned for the evening, but he agreed to show them his loft and take them to the Maple Tavern.

The bohemian character of his building suitably impressed the women. Frank made a selection of his paintings for the woman to view. He put *The Nude Pianist* on his big easel, others on smaller easels or against the wall. He turned on the studio lights and put Roscoe Mitchell's *Congliptious* on his record player.

The women were awed by the quality and power of his paintings. They were particularly impressed with *The Nude Pianist*.

—How did you come up with the idea for this painting? asked one of the women.

—It's a good story, said Frank, feeling comfortable in the company of friendly women, none of whom were beautiful, but they all were pleasant and womanly.

He explained that there was a woman pianist who lived directly across the street from his loft. He could see her practice. If she had her windows open, he could hear her. One hot June day, he looked

out and saw her practicing the piano utterly naked. He grabbed a sketchbook and made many quick drawings. Several other times when she practiced nude, he took photographs and made more detailed sketches. He finally met her on the Fourth of July when some men delivered an air conditioner to her apartment. After that, she never practiced nude again. He never heard her play again.

She moved away a couple of months ago, he continued, but I painted this picture as an homage to those fond memories.

—What a sweet story, said one of the women. The others nodded and smiled.

—Okay ladies, enough of my art. Who's thirsty? Frank asked. We should go to the Maple Tavern before it gets crowded.

Bounder, a twenty pound Maine Coon cat, came rocketing out of Frank's bedroom circled the studio and then sat down looking up at Frank chuffing.

—Oh, what a beautiful cat. What's her name?

—That's Bounder and he's all boy.

—Will he bite?

—Naw. He's a serious love-sponge. If you pet him, he'll crank up his purr machine and probably start drooling. He actually belongs to the man who lives on the first floor, but he's in Europe, so I'm cat sitting. Bounder is used to strangers.

It was a big mistake for Frank to go to the Maple Tavern. The women had a good time for a while, but it soon became apparent to the bar's regulars that their fellow artist, Frank Martin, was the Francesco Martinelli of the upcoming show at Elaine Aster Gallery. He took a lot of heat from his artist friends over the name change. He tried to shrug it off as Elaine Aster's marketing tactic.

—Like American's can't paint, said Albert, his oldest neighborhood friend, who looked like Giacometti's *Walking Man*. It's fucking insulting to all of us, Frank. You buy into that capitalist shit and you've abandoned real art and any integrity you had as an American artist. You're no longer a New York artist, you're a *faux* Italian artist.

—You've sold out, Frank, said another longtime friend. Francesco Martinelli? What pretentious bullshit. What's wrong with "Frank Martin"? You've pandered to a capitalist gallery owner who's going to use *you* for *her* greedy gains. You're just another wanna-be artist prostituting yourself to the almighty dollar. You don't belong in here anymore.

The talk turned uglier as the evening wore on. The three women were shocked at the hatred some of the bar patrons showed toward Frank. Fearing a violent *mêlée*, the three tourists beat a retreat to their midtown hotel.

Well, they witnessed a real in-your-face example of how viciously artists can treat one another, thought Frank.

None of his buddies congratulated him on his upcoming show. They were stuck on American Art, specifically Downtown New York City art; i.e., struggling, starving talents fighting for recognition. As if an American couldn't have the name Francesco Martinelli, thought Frank. Fuck those assholes.

By the time he left the Maple Tavern, whatever good feeling he had from the warm, supportive company of the three women had been poisoned by the animus and jealousy of his own neighbors...his fellow artists. Predictably, the usual events were unfolding. Everyone in the neighborhood was striving for the big break Frank was about to receive, but when one of their own actually achieved even a modicum of success, they turned on him. The thing was that his show hadn't even been *reviewed*, hadn't even officially *opened*! He could get panned in the art press, not sell a painting ... Elaine could close his show early if there weren't enough sales. His life was a confusion of doubts and insecurities.

He wanted to talk to someone, but he'd just taken enough shit from his artist friends to rule them out. He had no idea where Michiko was and besides, if he did call her, he would probably be arrested. For sure the NYPD had his phone tapped. The Nixon administration was giving license to all levels of authorities to curtail citizen's civil rights.

He decided to begin a new painting. Painting and drawing were like an elixir to him, a tonic that could give him great satisfaction or maybe kill him. Dr Jawarski said art was his cathexis. His concentration on art was so intense when he was working that it bordered on pathological. He decided to paint a self-portrait. He knew there were several full-length mirrors on castors in Alex's dance studio. He would borrow one of them.

He put the mirror next to his easel, opened a can of beer and studied his face.

—Christ, you look awful, he said to the face in the mirror. You need a haircut and your eyes are sunken into their sockets. You're almost skeletal.

There was a crash in his storeroom. Bounder came out proudly carrying a squirming mouse.

—Hey, tiger, now that you caught him, did your mama teach you how to kill him?

Bounder dropped the mouse and put a paw on the mouse's back. Bounder would let the mouse escape and then pounce on the poor devil.

—Bounder either kill the guy or let him go, but don't play with him.

Bounder ignored him and continued to let the mouse almost escape. Frank walked over snatched the mouse from under Bounder's paw and put it out of its misery. Bounder looked hurt.

—Sorry, pal, but I have a portrait to paint. It's probably a good thing I have a little blood on my hands.

Frank resumed studying his face. The pentimento of his depression was clearly visible. He was shaken by how close he came to ending his life. A head first dive out of a sixth floor window would do it. Messy, but quick.

He sat in his Adirondack chair and sketched. After a dozen drawings he had the concept for the painting and most of the details. He began painting.

A six-pack of beer and a pack of Camels later the sun was up and the self-portrait was done. He would wait a few days before making a definitive judgment.

It was in his basic style, but more expressionistic than the works at Elaine Aster Gallery.

Frank checked the sidewalk from his window and saw Alan, the husband of the art restoration couple who lived on the third floor, entering the building. He took the stairs down to the third floor and arrived at the same time as Alan.

—Alan, I need to ask you a favor.

—What's that?

—Can you make sure I'm up by 3:30 this afternoon? I have to be at Aster Gallery for a preview of my show.

—Frank you look awful. Are you sick?

—I was, but I'm okay now.

—Well, you don't look okay.

—I pulled an all-nighter and I need to get a little sleep before dealing with my public.

—Okay, but leave your door unlocked so I can shake your leg. You're liable to be so deep under, you wouldn't hear me pounding on your door.

—Okay, but don't let Bounder out. You know what an escape artist he can be.

—Don't worry, I got you covered.

—Thanks, man.

To be continued.

