

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 2

by Daniel Harris

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Independence Day was a Thursday. Frank had been invited to join some Yale Art School classmates in Vermont for a three-day bacchanalia. He knew if he went to Vermont, he would be an obnoxious and sorry drunk. Worse, his ex-wife, an alumna of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and girlfriend of one of his Yale classmates, would probably be there. That intersection would not be pleasant.

By stint of long hours of creative effort, he had managed to swing his bi-polar self away from the dark side that had hounded him since his wife moved out. The sheer volume of work on his new project, *The Nude Pianist*, had banished his depression as a day-to-day companion. Another reason he chose to stay in New York and work was that he just didn't like people all that much. Bette, his ex-wife, called him a bi-polar-schizoid-drunk owing to his mood swings and anti-social behavior. At the moment, he was feeling good about himself. He didn't want to wreck his current upbeat mood with industrial quantities of booze, drugs and casual sex on a Vermont farm. He would stay in the City. The weekend promised to be nearly perfect with temperatures in the 70's, good working weather in his loft. *The Nude Pianist* was turning out to be a bigger and more difficult painting than he had ever attempted. If he could find clever solutions to the many challenges posed by the painting, Frank was confident it would be his first museum-quality painting. Frank had been invited to submit one painting to a group show in October. If he could finish *The Nude Pianist* in time, it would be his entry.

After breakfast on Thursday morning, he walked uptown to the vegetable stand at Broadway and Houston to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. When he returned he saw the Japanese pianist talking to two men beside a van parked in front of her building. He couldn't believe his luck. There she was. He could talk to her and introduce himself. At least he could learn her name. He would have to force himself to overcome his discomfort at meeting strangers. It was easy for him to be friendly and witty once he had overcome his initial shyness. As he approached the trio, he hoped his desire to meet this woman would help him to overcome his nascent anthropophobia. The three appeared vexed.

—Good morning, said Frank. Beautiful morning.

—Yes, it is, said one of the men.

—Are you guys working today?

—They are here to install an air conditioner in my loft, said the woman in slightly Japanese inflected English.

—Does that mean I won't hear you practicing anymore? I really enjoy hearing you.

The Japanese woman gave him a sharp look, as if he had crossed barriers and intruded on her privacy. Frank felt her displeasure at once. He fought the involuntary desire to abandon the meeting and flee to his home. The woman saw that she had hurt Frank's feelings.

—Well, thank you, she said. Most people don't like to hear musicians practice. It's not a performance and the repetitions can be maddening.

—What I've heard is impressive and enjoyable. But I'm a painter; I enjoy listening to music while I work. It's calming and sometimes inspiring.

The first thing Michiko noticed about Frank was the intensity of his eyes. The eyes were a black-olive black and sharply focused. When he looked at her, his eyes darted over her face and body scanning her features. She felt naked under his gaze. It was disconcerting and she was unaccustomed to being scrutinized so openly and thoroughly by a stranger who stood an arm's length from

her. No Japanese man would ever look at a strange Japanese woman so boldly.

He was a solidly built man, just over six feet tall with a big chest and powerful torso. His arms and legs were well muscled. He had a short well-kept beard and shoulder-length black hair, which he wore in a ponytail. He was dressed in denim cut-offs and a blue denim work shirt. He wore heavy work boots with wool socks.

Here's a man, thought Michiko, a real man. Maybe he could be useful to her.

—Well, there's a problem, she said. These men say they can't put this air conditioner in any of my front windows. I need air conditioning to protect my pianos from the vicissitudes of weather.

Frank was taken aback by her use of the word vicissitudes. She either was a Japanese-American or a good student of English.

—I like that, vicissitudes, said Frank giving her a smile.

—Do you have a problem with that word? she asked a little too harshly.

—No, I didn't think you were a native English speaker and it is not the most common word even for Americans.

—I was born in Japan, but went to American private schools. My father is an executive with Mitsubishi Industries in Los Angeles.

Her hauteur spoke reams about her class and sense of entitlement.

—Ah, said Frank. I didn't mean to offend. I couldn't begin to speak Japanese.

She smiled and redirected her gaze to the AC unit on the sidewalk.

One of the AC guys asked her what she wanted to do.

—I'm not sure. There must be some solution.

—Have you considered a split unit, asked Frank.

—That's going to cost much more than this large window unit, said the smaller of the two AC guys.

The three men looked at the sidewalk. The pianist walked around in a circle looking up at her sixth floor windows. Frank noticed she was light on her feet. She had long full thighs and muscular calves

with trim ankles. Her long legs made her seem taller than her five foot five stature. She was wearing white shorts with a red velour sleeveless top and dark red sandals. Being unfamiliar with oriental women, Frank couldn't suss out her age, but she looked to be mid to late twenties.

—Let me look at the windows, said Frank. I'm a pretty good carpenter and I might be able to fabricate a solution.

—Who on earth *are* you? asked the pianist.

—Sorry, I'm Frank Martin. I'm an artist. I live on the top floor across the street. I also double as the super of the building.

—I'm Michiko Mita, said the pianist extending her hand. Pleased to meet you.

Her handshake was firm. Frank could feel the strength in her fingers.

—Well, lady, what do you want us to do? said the AC guy with the clipboard. I have a Fourth of July picnic to attend,.

—Take the window unit up to her loft, said Frank. I'll see if I can find a solution. If not you can pick it up on Monday.

—I'll have to call my boss.

—You call your boss. I'll take my vegetables home and return with a tape measure, pencil and paper, replied Frank.

When the AC guys left, Michiko and Frank stood in her loft looking at the windows.

—Have you ever tried to open one of these windows? Frank asked pointing to the end windows. There were six windows lining the front of her loft. Each one was eight feet across. Frank noticed there was an electrical outlet under each window. He hoped at least one outlet was working.

—Only this middle window. The others are stuck.

—I don't think you want cool air blowing on you when you're practicing. We should put it on this end window.

—How noisy is it?

—I don't know. It doesn't say anything other than “quiet cool” on the box.

While Frank worked to free the end window from years of paint, Michiko lay on a long leather couch studying a music score.

—I'm breaking for lunch, said Frank. I'll come back in half an hour.

—I'm sorry. I became totally engrossed in studying, I've completely forgotten about you.

—You can read that like a book?

—Yes, I have the music memorized and fingered in my head before I sit at the keyboard to actually play it.

—That's impressive. I use to play the saxophone, but I can't read a note of music. I played by ear.

—My abilities are what separate major artists like myself from the rest, she instructed. Not many pianists can do what I do. Glenn Gould is the only one I know.

Her bravura was palpable.

There was an awkward moment when they looked at each other. She gave him a beautiful smile. Frank returned her smile and examined her physical appearance more closely. Her arms and legs were well formed and of a good length. She had long fingers, which she used expressively while speaking. Her narrow oval face featured a Cupid's bow mouth and large eyes. Her perfect complexion did not require make-up, though she had curled her eyelashes. Her eyes did not have an epicanthic fold. Frank wondered if she had had surgery.

—I have fresh sushi tuna. Can I offer you some homemade sushi?

—Sure. I love sushi, said Frank, who was clueless about Japanese food. He had an aunt who owned a Maine Coon cat named Shooshe, but that was the limit of his familiarity. Growing up in Door County, Wisconsin, his meals had been standard American fare. In 1950's rural America, pizza was ethnic food and only to be had where there were Italian enclaves in big cities, like Chicago or New York.

They sat on cushions on the floor at a low table. Michiko instructed Frank in proper sushi etiquette. He thought he impressed her with his skill using chopsticks, something he perfected in nearby Chinatown's many inexpensive restaurants. The wasabi made his nose run.

—You probably need a bigger lunch, said Michiko.
—Actually, I take my big meal at breakfast. This is light, tasty and refreshing.
—Would you like hot tea, or would you prefer ice tea?
—Which is proper?
—I'm having hot tea.
—I'll have hot tea.

When Michiko returned with the tea, she poured two small cups and sat across from Frank.

—I'm going to miss hearing you practice, said Frank. Sometimes I stop painting and listen to you. Your playing inspires me.

—Thank you. I'm more than a little embarrassed. Sometimes when it is hot, I practice in the nude. I wonder how many times you have watched me like that?

—I haven't been that lucky, he lied. Now, with AC you won't have to disrobe to practice. The downside is, after I've installed the air conditioner and the framework around it, I won't hear you.

After lunch, Frank managed to free the window. He installed the unit and found the circuit breaker. He modified a narrow double pane window to fill the empty six feet in the window opening and insulated it against rain, wind and sound. Frank refused to take any money for his work. He gave her his telephone number should she have any trouble with the installation.

To be continued

