

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 21

by Daniel Harris

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Francesco and Michiko had agreed that Michiko would send Francesco letters or postcards: no phone calls. When Francesco knew the exact locations, he mailed her cards with beautiful watercolor views of New York. Frequently he also decorated the envelopes with fanciful flowers. He rarely wrote more than "Miss you terribly." Michiko would cram a hundred words or more on the back of a post card. Francesco needed a magnifying glass to read her little missives. He knew that writing those messages gave her a boost, especially when she was feeling the stress of a long and difficult tour.

Michiko was currently on tour in the Far East and Australia. It was a brutal schedule with long flights between engagements. Francesco had no expectations that Michiko would have time or energy to send post cards. Much to his surprise, postcards began to arrive after a week.

Elaine Aster had just telephoned him requesting a meeting. Francesco said he would be there in ten minutes. They agreed on five o'clock that afternoon.

Elaine was on the warpath. She gave Francesco a proper dressing-down for failing to deliver new paintings. She suggested he paint pictures themed to the turbulent anti-war events. Police on campuses across the country were tear-gassing and beating students for protesting the Vietnam War. As a prominent rising art star, he needed to be a visible presence in the anti-war movement. It

would add a political component to his output, and put him forward as a hip politically aware artist. Better yet, if he painted an iconic picture, it would make serious money in poster sales. She mentioned Shirley Preston as an example of a political artist who had joined the anti-war movement. Preston made half her income from poster sales of her anti-war and Women's Movement paintings.

When he left Elaine's office Francesco was furious and demoralized. No way was he going to paint political schlock poster art. How dare his own gallery to hold up a Shirley Preston poster as a model for him. Against his better judgment, he stopped at the Maple Tavern. Soon enough he became embroiled in a heated argument about commerce, art, and of course the Vietnam War. He came home blotto. Stumbling around his studio he found paints, brushes and blank canvases.

The following morning, he saw useful artistic potential in last night's debauch. He laid in four cases of beer, stocked the fridge with cold cuts, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes and sandwich bread. Over the next ten days he produced five paintings. Four of the paintings were small (20" x 22") highly detailed images of the horrors of the Vietnam War. Painted on wood panels each image was distinct and startling. The four panels could be viewed individually or as a tetraptych. The horrors depicted on the panels were abstract expressionist, but the settings, the beautiful Vietnamese countryside, were painted using a hyper-realistic airbrush technique. Goya's *The Disasters of War* and news media photos from the war zone had inspired the four small paintings. There were layers of images and meaning.

He also painted one large canvas, five feet on a side. The canvas had more than fifty figures. These figures were portraits of major personalities involved in the pro and anti-war movement. The protestors marched against a terrifying phalanx of anonymous police and National Guard. The action was expressionistic, but the setting was surreal: political anarchy expressed in distorted symbols. It was a perfect allegorical picture of a country torn asunder by civil unrest.

All five paintings were powerful political statements combining the absurd with the surreal. They would be controversial. Each side of the argument about the war would find something to cheer and something to hate. They would make Elaine, Angelique and Francesco serious money.

—That bitch wants political, I'll give her political, yelled Francesco to his canvases.

An exhausted Francesco collapsed on his bed and slept for two days. When he finally roused himself, he checked his mailbox. There were three cards from Michiko. She was having a miserable tour. The pianos were poor quality, the reviews mixed and she had the flu. Francesco checked the calendar, she wouldn't return for another two weeks. Poor Michiko. He made a humorous card for her and sent it to Tokyo, her last stop on the tour. He even added a blot of champagne.

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Elaine Aster loved the paintings. She would mount a group show of anti-war paintings. Francesco had come through for her. His five paintings would be the focal point of the show.

—Well, said Elaine, standing in Francesco's studio studying the big anti-war painting, this is the Francesco I put under contract. Thank god you're painting again.

—Well, you pissed me off, threatened to cut my retainer. You have no idea of the mental changes you put me through.

—Francesco, I shouldn't have had to go to that extreme to get you to paint. Your reputation is that of a steady consistent worker. I don't want to know why you weren't painting. Just don't pull that no-painting stunt again.

—Easy, Elaine. I'm first and last a painter. It's not a stunt. It's not like I was partying. I was enjoying my newfound emotional stability.

—But, why haven't you cashed the last three checks I sent you?

—I don't paint for money. I paint because I need to paint. I've lived my life with so little money, I don't know what to do *with* money. I took some time off. I still drew and made watercolor sketches every day. I just didn't make any paintings.

Elaine was confused by Francesco's last remark. What was she going to do with this guy?

—Can I treat you and Michiko to dinner?

—Michiko's in Sydney, Australia.

—Can I invite you over for dinner?

—Tonight?

—Tonight. Come to my apartment at seven.

—Can I wear these clothes?

—It's only the two of us. Wear what you wish, said Elaine.

With luck, she thought, she would get him out of whatever clothes he wore.

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Francesco woke in Elaine's apartment at noon the following day. The night before, Elaine had plied him with expensive whisky, fine wines, and gourmet foods. After flirting with him during dinner, she seduced him. Francesco was sexually sated, but he didn't feel empty. They had even had sex earlier that morning. Elaine was a woman who gave you power while she satisfied you and herself.

—Am I going to see you again? asked Francesco.

—Of course. We're business partners.

—Does that mean...

—Silly boy, just because I slept with you one night doesn't mean you're not still one of my artists. Don't do something stupid like fall in love with me.

—I meant, does this mean I *have* to sleep with you again?

—You didn't like it? said Elaine pouting.

—That's not what I meant. Is sleeping with you now part of my retainer?

—Francesco. What a child you are. I pay you \$1500 a month to paint pictures, I don't pay for stud services. You got a little treat for finally starting to paint again. Just leave it at that.

Francesco and Elaine shared a cab from her Greenwich Village apartment to her gallery in SoHo. He was feeling guilty. It wasn't like Michiko didn't have her fling in Chicago, but still he felt he was

violating Michiko's trust. As much as he enjoyed himself with Elaine, it would change their relationship: it was no longer just business, there were invisible strings attached. He decided to communicate with Elaine only through Angelique. With Michiko gone so often, Elaine represented a possible threat to his relationship with Michiko. Francesco looked over at Elaine. She smiled at him. He couldn't believe that last night and this morning was only a piece of business for Elaine. For her, sex was just another checkbook to buy loyalty. Was she a controlling bitch or what?

To be continued.

