The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 22

by Daniel Harris

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❄ ❄ ❄Elaine and Francesco exited the taxi in front of Elaine Aster Gallery.

—When are you going to deliver those five anti-war paintings to the gallery? asked Elaine.

—They have to dry and I may make a few refinements, said Francesco wondering whether to give Elaine a kiss or a handshake.

—Don't keep them too long. They must be photographed and framed. We will make art posters and sell them through the gallery. If there is demand, then we'll do a lower quality print run for the college dorm crowd.

Elaine extended her hand.

—Thank you for a nice evening, Elaine, said Francesco, lowering his eyes.

—The pleasure was mine, said Elaine shaking his hand and giving him a wink. Don't expect a repeat performance anytime soon, young man. And don't varnish those paintings. They photograph better without varnish.

Francesco walked the three blocks to his studio. His head was abuzz with confusing and conflicting thoughts. He almost stepped in front of a turning car on Prince Street.

Was he now Elaine's gigolo? Would he have to come to her apartment at her beck and call? Would she suddenly show up at his studio demanding sex? What if Michiko found out? Would Michiko throw him out if she found out he had sex with Elaine? Would Elaine skim money off his sales for sexual services? Christ, sex was supposed to be a pleasurable act, not a business proposition.

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—I don't believe it, said Francesco. Bounder was waiting for Francesco in front of his building.

—Bounder, how the hell did you get out here?

—Meow.

—I'm sure you're hungry, said Francesco, picking up Bounder and taking him to his studio.

—You're fav, Bounder. A fresh can of mackerel cat food.

When he went downstairs to check for mail, there was a telegram from Michiko in his mailbox:

Sender: Michiko Mita Sydney, Australia Night Cable Francesco. Urgent. Meet me Tokyo Hilton. I need your help. Michiko

Francesco returned Bounder to Alex, who was not pleased to see a cat he secretly hoped would move permanently to Francesco's studio. Francesco withdrew $5000 from his account and flew to Tokyo. It was the best present he could give Michiko. He lifted her spirits, and gave her strength. She was ill with the flu, but she still practiced six hours each day and gave three private concerts in the homes of wealthy music patrons. Her final solo concert in Tokyo was sold out.

—Francesco, I'm too sick to play the big recital tomorrow night.

—Michiko, you can't back down now. I'll find a doctor.

—I'm burning up. Feel my forehead.

—I'm calling your manager right now, he said taking his hand off her forehead. You need immediate medical attention.

—No, no, I just need rest.

—No, you need strong medicine. You must play that recital tomorrow night. It's the culmination of the tour. Steinway even flew one of their New York technicians to regulate the piano for you.

Francesco went into action. He called Michiko's road manager who summoned a physician and a nurse. Frank asked the hotel staff for a vaporizer. The medicine the doctor gave Michiko knocked her out for twelve hours.

The next evening, Francesco was worried about Michiko. He had never seen her so nervous before a performance.

—Francesco, I'm worried I won't have the physical strength to play the concert.

—Sweetheart, I wouldn't worry about that. Think of how you rule over the piano in *The Nude Pianist*.

Michiko laughed.

—What's so funny? asked Francesco.

—You want me to play the recital nude with my back to the audience?

—Now that's a funny image.

Michiko looked in the dressing room mirror checking her make-up.

—Francesco, you are so smart relaxing me by making me laugh. I'm ready. Hurry to your seat, or they won't let you in the hall.

—Ok, my love. Play pretty, said Francesco, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Francesco didn't know what switch Michiko threw in her psyche or body, but the concert was brilliant. It was one of the best performances he could remember. She finished the recital with the Brahms *Handel Variations*. The normally subdued Japanese audience broke into cheers and wild applause when she finished.

By the time Francesco arrived back stage, Michiko was playing the first of what were to be six encores. She was brilliant. The stage was littered with bouquets of flowers. Francesco stood backstage applauding wildly.

—That's my girl! he shouted to the non-English speaking stage crew.

Michiko rushed into her dressing room. Francesco couldn't believe what he saw. She was covered in perspiration and coughing violently.

—Francesco, keep the door closed and don't let anyone in. I have to towel down and change clothes.

—Michiko, I'm worried about you. You will catch your death of pneumonia.

—I have to greet fans and supporters. Help me into this fresh gown.

After Michiko accepted the appreciation of her last fan, Francesco and Michiko's road manager from Meyer Artist Management spirited her to her hotel. The nurse was still at the hotel, administered a sedative and antibiotics.

Francesco slept on a daybed in the living room of Michiko's suite. While Michiko slept, Francesco wandered the streets of Tokyo sketching. He would return to eat meals with Michiko, entertaining her by making up stories about his sketches. Michiko gave him insights into the Japanese culture depicted in his drawings of street scenes, cafés, restaurants, markets, and parks. He brewed her hot tea with lemon and gave her sponge baths.

Feeling better a few days later, Michiko suggested they visit a famous sushi bar in Tokyo.

—Francesco, I don't know if you can tell, said Michiko, but this is first-rate sushi.

—I'm no expert, but the fish tastes especially fresh and flavorful. Remember when you made me sushi the day we met when I installed your AC unit?

—That was second-rate compared to this.

—That was the first time I ever ate sushi. So, that was the best sushi until today. I was more interested in the chef than the meal.

—Didn't you eat sushi or sashimi when you were walking around Tokyo?

—I preferred the noodle shops. There were better subjects to sketch and I love soba noodles.

—Do you like the beer I ordered you? It's Kirin Tanrei a *happoshu* beer.

—What does *happoshu* mean?

—Bubbly alcohol.

—Well, it's light and goes well with the meal.

Francesco watched how Michiko ate the sushi and sashimi. He copied her movements. Sometimes she used her fingers, other times chopsticks.

—Michiko, you seem to be on the mend. How do you feel?

—Weak. Those antibiotics really knocked me out.

—I have a plan, my dear. Why don't we go to Honolulu for a vacation? You can recuperate in a tropical paradise. It will break up the long flight back to New York.

—Sounds inviting. But do you think you can find a place with a piano? I've already lost a week of practice.

—I'll ask Sally, your road manager. She knows everything.

That afternoon, while Michiko napped, Francesco and Sally found a cottage with a grand piano not far from Honolulu. The minimum rental was two weeks. Francesco took it beginning in two days. The travel desk at the hotel changed Michiko's and Francesco's return tickets to New York for tickets with a two-week layover in Honolulu.

Francesco wired Angelique asking her to wire two thousand dollars to the main Western Union office in Honolulu. Angelique wired back that the money would be waiting for him when he arrived in Honolulu.

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Francesco and Michiko sat on the veranda of their rental cottage, drinking cocktails and enjoying the evening before having their last dinner in Honolulu.

—This is really tasty, said Francesco, saluting Michiko with his glass. What did you put in it?

—Fruit juices, champagne and a splash of bitters.

—It hits the spot.

—What are you going to do with all your sketchbooks?

—I bought another suitcase for them. I've been gone almost a month and I've filled over fifty sketch books, plus I bought a lot of handmade paper in Tokyo.

—What about all the stuff you picked up on the beach? And the pressed leaves and flowers?

—I'm packing them separately. I don't know if I can take them off the island. Our landlord said I have to go to an agricultural inspection station at the airport. They will remove anything I can't take to the mainland.

After dinner they strolled on the beach.

—This was such a good idea, said Michiko. Francesco, you are the best. These two weeks have flown by, my fingers are back in shape, I feel strong and we've both lost our sickly winter pallor.

—Michiko, I can't believe how brown you are. How did you get so tan when you were inside practicing most of the day?

—Well, I tan easily. Growing up in L.A. I was tan all year. My mother, who is very traditional, was appalled. Her skin is always white-white.

—Well, you certainly look a lot better than when we arrived. You're now the very paragon of health.

—I'm not looking forward to the flight home, said Michiko. What time do we leave?

—Our flight is at 3 p.m. We have to vacate the house by noon.

—I'd like to get in a few hours of practice before we leave.

—That's fine. I'll have everything packed and in the rental car. We'll grab a light lunch on the beach and then head to the airport.

—You're always so organized.

—Don't forget, I spent my youth sorting apples, said Francesco chuckling and squeezing Michiko's hand.

To be continued.