The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 23

by Daniel Harris

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After the Tokyo experience, Frank and Michiko decided that when she went on extended tours, Frank would accompany her. Frank showed her tour schedule to Angelique who booked him into lecture-demonstrations and master classes at art schools in the cities where Michiko was performing. It was a good source of income that provided for better meals and lodging than Michiko normally received.

Frank was not comfortable speaking to strangers and was terrified before every lecture or class, but once in the sessions, he was witty, knowledgeable, professional and a hit with the attendees. He gave these classes and demonstrations sober. His prodigious technique awed the students in his master classes.

During a two-day residency at his Chicago Art Institute alma mater, he painted a nearly perfect copy of The Art Institute's recent acquisition: Gustave Caillebotte's masterpiece *Paris Street; Rainy Day,* from memory. The next day he painted another version. By altering the perspective and changing the people to nightmarish beings in a hostile red desert, he changed the meaning of a painting about social class to a terrifying surreal landscape. The students and teachers were astounded. Frank was the real deal and the pride of the school.

Frank had found a voice that suited him. He was able to paint sober. The style was very much like the surreal, cubist, expressionist style of the painting he had sold Carlo Sylvestre in 1968. He was

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outside the mainstream Pop and Op artists of this time, but he had a strong following and sales of his paintings were consistently high and prices kept rising. Sotheby resold one of Frank's paintings from the 1968 solo show at Elaine Aster's gallery at auction for $45,000. Of course Frank didn't see any of that money, but Elaine raised the prices on his paintings 20%. Between Michiko's successful musical career and Frank's earnings, they lived very well.

In January 1972, Michiko gave her annual solo recital at the Whipple estate in Greenwich, Connecticut. She gave this recital every year as part of her rental agreement with the Whipple's who subsidized her apartment on 81st Street in Manhattan. It was a select affair with food catered by the finest chefs. Only the wealthiest, most powerful families in America were invited. Frank usually didn't travel with Michiko to nearby gigs; but because the weather forecast was foreboding, he didn't want her traveling alone. Frank rented a car and they drove to Greenwich.

Frank loved watching Michiko perform. At home, he would sit, usually with Michiko's piano teacher and mentor, Nataliya Ivanovna, watching and listening to her play a dress rehearsal of an upcoming solo concert. Frequently he would sketch her playing. He really enjoyed it when other musicians were involved. He noticed that each musical instrument attracted a performer with unique physical and personality characteristics. He especially enjoyed when she rehearsed the Mozart *Piano Quintet with Winds*. The wind players were different in personality and body type than the string players who normally played with Michiko. Frank made ink sketches of each player, which Michiko presented as gifts to the performers after the concert.

When Frank and Michiko arrived at the Whipple estate, the staff was very attentive to the young couple. Michiko had been given the six-room guest cottage as a green room. The Whipple's had rented a piano from Steinway and placed it in the guest cottage. The piano had been voiced and regulated like the piano in the Whipple's music salon in the estate house. Both pianos were adjusted to copy Michiko's piano at home.

Garth Whipple was delighted that Francesco had accompanied Michiko. He was anxious to show Francesco his art collection.

—May I offer you a drink, Francesco?

—I never drink when I know I will be driving, said Francesco.

—Very sensible, said Mr. Whipple. I would like to show you a recent acquisition. Follow me into the den.

He escorted Francesco into his den and showed him the recent acquisition: a Francesco Martinelli painting. Frank looked at it and remembered it as belonging to the group of sixty paintings Elaine had stored at Grillo Moving and Storage.

—Ah, I remember this painting, said Frank. Good choice. How did you happen to purchase it?

—I was in Elaine Aster Gallery in SoHo and saw several of your paintings. None of them were quite the correct color scheme for this room, but I liked what I saw. I told my wife, Alice, about my discovery. Alice decided to surprise me. She invited Elaine here to view this room. Elaine said she had the perfect Martinelli painting for this setting. Alice bought this painting for a steal.

—How much was a steal, asked Frank, who slowly began to suspect Elaine of dealing behind his back.

—Alice didn't want to tell me, but when I received her financial statement from Goldman Sachs, I saw she paid only $149,000. We paid double that for the Rauschenberg in the living room and I personally like this better.

—Thank you, said Frank. That's high praise, Rauschenberg is an artist in the history books.

—You're no slouch, Francesco. You can actually paint. Rauschenberg can assemble. There's a difference. In the long term, I'm willing to bet on you.

—When did your wife purchase this painting? asked Frank.

—It was for my birthday last May. My birthday is May third. I think she actually bought it in April because the gallery framed the painting.

—I like the frame. They did an excellent job. It shows off the painting to good effect, said Frank, seething from having been duped by Elaine and possibly Angelique.

Michiko's concert was at three. It lasted two hours and was wonderful, though the rich and famous who attended were suitably reserved in their praise. Frank overheard one elderly woman telling her companion about her family hiring Alfred Cortort to play a Schumann recital for her betrothal party at her parent's estate in Lucerne. Another bragged of Vladimir Horowitz playing for a holiday gathering at her Fifth Avenue *pied-á-terre*, as she called her eighteen-room duplex.

The predicted snowstorm started after the end of the concert. Frank had had enough and didn't care to stay any longer than necessary. Michiko was scheduled to fly out of LaGuardia tomorrow afternoon and she wanted to leave before the snow made the drive home dangerous or impossible. They gave their excuses and left, but not before Frank showed Michiko the painting in the den.

—You were not paid for this painting? asked an incredulous Michiko.

—It has never come up on the list of sold paintings, either from Elaine or Angelique. I was not paid for this and it sold for $149,000! My take should be $60,000!

—We could live on that for three years! said Michiko angrily. Frank you have to speak with Angelique. Elaine is robbing you. I'm furious.

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As they drove back to the City, the elephant in the car grew and grew.

—Frank, I never liked those women.

—I always thought you were a little jealous. Not that I have any designs on them. You know I'm totally in love with you.

—No, you remember when we went to that Italian restaurant with Angelique after Elaine signed you and I told you, “I don't trust that woman.” You ignored me.

—Sweetheart, I was in no position to know. I was a total novice in the art world. I could paint, but I didn't know the business. I needed Angelique. Carlo Silvestre recommended her for chrissakes.

—Yes, but your radar was not turned on. I didn't get a good feeling about her. She was too rich for a 5% person.

—Well, my dear, 5% of $149,00 is about $7,500. Not bad for doing nothing. If your clients sell paintings worth that much each week, you'll earn almost $400,000 a year. Four years ago I lived on $4500 a year. We still live frugally. Last year I made more than $40,00 and you made over $75,000, but we still live on less than $20,000 a year.

—Frank, it's not about money, it's about principles. Elaine and Angelique are unscrupulous, unethical and just plain vicious. They're taking advantage of you. How many other paintings have they sold and not paid you your due?

Frank drove on in silence. The snow was so intense he could barely see ten feet in front of the car. It was white knuckle driving. When they arrived back in Manhattan, Frank dropped Michiko at the apartment and returned the rental car. Walking back to the apartment on 81st street he saw a homeless woman who boldly asked him for money. He could barely see her face under a thick layer of snow and tattered scarves

—Mister, can you give me three dollars so I can sleep at the homeless shelter?

—Why should I give *you* money? I give money to street performers, but they earn their money. What do you do?

—Do? Why, I'm a witch. I can read the future. Some people value my predictions.

Frank studied the woman, taking her measure. She was dressed in rags. Two pairs of torn mittens covered her hands.

—Read the future?

—Yes, I can read the future.

—How do I know you're not bullshitting me?

—I can tell your past, too.

—Oh, really. So tell me.

—Today you were betrayed.

Frank was shaken. How could this sorry sack of a woman know that? Maybe she *was* prescient? Frank looked in his pocket. He had a couple of tens and a five.

—Ok, I'll give you this fiver for the future, said Frank holding the bill for the old crone.

—The future is bright but tragic. You will lose everything. Twice.

—That's it? That's pretty depressing.

—I don't invent this, I know this, said the hag taking the five dollar note.

Frank walked to the apartment more shaken than he was by the news that he was being hornswaggled by Elaine and Angelique. It was all too Shakespearian to believe. He wouldn't mention this meeting with the soothsayer to Michiko.

To be continued.