

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 28

by Daniel Harris

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On Monday, Michiko returned from Cleveland in a foul mood. She called Francesco's studio at three in the afternoon.

—I was hoping this was you, said Francesco, putting his brushes on the work table. How did your concerts go?

—I hate that guy.

—What guy?

—The conductor, the Russian martinet.

—Why?

—He would call me into his studio and then lecture me on Beethoven: tempo, dynamics, fingerings ... he put me down on everything. He even wanted me to re-finger the concertos. He treated me like a six-year-old. He was convinced a Japanese woman couldn't properly interpret Beethoven. Fortunately, he didn't pull that in front of the orchestra. The orchestra was fantastic, but that bastard made life miserable for everyone.

Francesco was taken aback. Michiko rarely used hot language or had trouble with conductors or other musicians. They were usually honored to have her as a guest artist. She raised everyone's standards by her superb musicianship.

—Well, said Francesco, I gather the concerts didn't go well.

—Oh, they were excellent, but that fascist bastard kept asking me into his studio and telling me things like: "in measure so- and-so you should have used your second finger on the e-flat. Your fingering just didn't bring out the correct interpretation of the phrase. It's crucial to Beethoven's phrasing." Oohhh! I could kill that pig of a man. He

was trying to break my confidence. And his breath and body odor was pestiferous.

It would be a tough night at home, thought Frank.

—Should I call it a day here at the studio and come home?

—No. I need to vent. I'm going to see Ivanovna.

Her teacher was Nataliya Ivanovna, a woman in her late eighties and doyen to the world's top virtuoso pianists.

—Do you want to eat dinner together later? Frank asked.

—No. Stay at your studio. I'm not fit to be around.

—Are you sure?

—Francesco. Don't argue with me. I'm up to here with men telling me what to do.

—Okay, sweetheart. Call me tomorrow if you want to see me.

Click.

—Like I'm to blame, said Francesco to the dead line.

Francesco tried to return to the painting on his easel, but he couldn't concentrate. He had never heard Michiko so upset. It rattled him. He was no musician, but when she played the final run-through for Ivanovna before the Cleveland trip, it was stirring. What happened? Jesus, he thought, if critics were critical of every brushstroke, he'd never be able to finish a painting. He began to clean his brushes and clean up the work area when the telephone rang.

—Hello.

—Francesco, Angelique calling.

—Oh, Angelique! Any good news?

—Francesco, you sound upset.

—Well, Michiko just returned from playing with the Cleveland Orchestra for a week and is on the war path. Apparently she had some issues with a Russian conductor. She is beside herself with rage. I'm hiding out in my studio.

—Sorry about that, but I have news for you. Friday night, I spoke with the Whipples and the Tillinghasts. Both the Whipples and the Tillinghasts paid \$11,000 for your paintings. Elaine brokered the sale of a Matisse to the Whipples, which explains the \$149,000.

—That makes sense. Which Matisse? Did they say?
—*The Manila Shawl* from 1911.
—That's a great painting.
—To get back to business, what doesn't make sense is why *you* weren't paid. I'm still on the case, but Elaine is incommunicado. I tried everything to contact her. She's in Paris, but I wasn't able to locate her.
—Well, Elaine has to come home sometime. As we used to say on the farm, the fox will return to the hen house when he's hungry.
—Well, hopefully she will lay the golden egg for you when she returns.
—So, what are you going to do?
—I'm going to speak with Elaine, of course. I want to hear her explanation. It was dumb luck that you discovered that two of your paintings were sold behind your back.
—But are there *other* paintings sold without payment?
—I'm working on that. I have a contact at Grillo Moving and Storage who might be able to find out how many paintings of yours are stored there.
—That would be helpful.
—But you didn't hear that from me. Don't tell anyone, not even Michiko. Do you understand? Given the contract you have with Elaine, she could raise a ruckus.
—Mum's, the word. Thank you, Angelique, for helping me. I feel like a real cad for not trusting you.
—Not to worry, Francesco, no one in this business trusts anyone.
—That's not comforting.
—No, but you are *my* client. When you make money, I make money. My 5% comes out of her portion of the sale, not yours. I'm on your side.
—I got it. Keep me informed.
—I shall.
—Is that it?
—I'll let you know when there's more news.
—Good night, Angelique, thank you for your help.

—You're welcome. Good night, Francesco.

Francesco sat in his studio smoking. He should eat, but he had no appetite and he didn't feel like eating Maple Tavern food. He fed Bouncer and lay in his bed fully dressed under two blankets. He was reading Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Frank thought his life was a gulag. The loft was cold, not Siberian cold, but cold enough to sympathize with Denisovich.

The phone rang.

—Hello.

—Frank Martin?

—Right, replied Frank.

—Frank, you may have heard of me. My name is Anatoly Gringovitch. I graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago about ten years before you did.

—Yes, I met you once when you gave a master class at the school. I was a first year student and a hick from Wisconsin. You were very encouraging. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call Mr. Gringovitch?

—I'm at the Maple Tavern with some SAIC graduates. They said you lived in the neighborhood. Big Jack the bartender gave me your number. I thought maybe I could visit your studio.

—Sure. I haven't eaten. Why don't I come to the Maple Tavern, I'll get a bite, then we can come back here.

—Perfect. You remember what I look like?

—Yeah. Your picture is on the inside cover of last month's *Art Forum*. I'll see you in ten.

To be continued.

