

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 34

by Daniel Harris

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Michiko had just returned from giving an evening performance and was still dressed in her concert attire. She and Francesco were sitting in the kitchen drinking champagne.

—Francesco, said Michiko with rising impatience, did you talk to Angelique? Did she confront Elaine? How much did Angelique find out about Elaine's thievery, and is Angelique a co-conspirator with Elaine? Talk to me!

—Easy sweetheart, said Francesco putting a platter of shrimp and hot sauce on the table. Angelique visited my studio this afternoon. She luncheoned with Elaine at the Four Seasons. Elaine admitted everything to Angelique.

—Elaine admitted what?

—Elaine has opened another gallery in Paris. She used the proceeds from the sale of two of my paintings to help fund it. Angelique is drawing up a new contract. They are meeting on Monday.

—Francesco, you are so goddamn stupid believing those thieves. How much has that bitch actually stolen from you?

Francesco looked at Michiko. She was in high feather, spoiling for a fight. He didn't want a fight. He also didn't want Michiko telephoning Angelique or Elaine and arguing over the phone.

—Didn't your concert go well tonight?

—It went just fine. Stop evading my questions. I'm worried about you. You look terrible, the mask of depression is on your face.

—Well, I feel like an indentured servant. I keep delivering paintings, Elaine sells them, but I don't see any money.

—I ask you again, said Michiko trying to control her rage, *exactly* how much does Elaine owe you?

—About \$35,000. She sold my paintings to Whipple and to Tillinghast for \$11,000 each. But her gallery manager in Paris sold two paintings last week netting over \$23,000. Angelique has written a new contract where I receive 10% of all sales at Aster Place, the new Paris gallery, and Elaine Aster Gallery in New York.

—That's bullshit, Francesco. Damn it, if she doesn't pay you, does it make a difference what percentage you get? She could promise you 100%, but you'll never *see* anything.

—No, Michiko, Angelique scared the bejesus out of Elaine. She'll start paying.

—I don't believe you. How naïve are you? Is this new contract a written document?

—Sweetheart, be reasonable. Of course, Angelique is a lawyer. I'm sure I'll get my money, just not as soon as I'd like. Angelique has threatened Elaine with a criminal charge if she doesn't begin paying me what she owes. Elaine could lose her galleries.

—But then she wouldn't make any money. She would pay you *nothing*.

—Don't say that. I want Elaine to succeed. It's in my best interest.

—Stop defending Elaine. You're not sleeping with her are you?

Michiko stool up and smashed her champagne flute on the floor.

—Damn it, Francesco, I told you those women were crooks. Now I'm going to lose you to your depressions. For how long: Days, Weeks, Months? I can see it coming. You're wearing it on your face.

Michiko ran into their bedroom, slamming the door. Francesco could hear her sobbing.

Francesco took a broom and dustpan from the kitchen closet, swept up the broken glass, and put the shrimp in the fridge.

He gently knocked on the bedroom door. Michiko did not answer.

Francesco opened the bedroom door and walked to the bed. He sat and put his hand on Michiko's shoulder.

—Michiko, trust me in this, will you? Everything will work out. It's not like we're starving. I have \$150,000 in the bank. I don't know how much you have, but probably double that. I'm sure I'll be paid. For sure Elaine has to pay me before my contract is up, or I won't renew with her. I'm her top-earning painter.

Francesco went into the bathroom, returning with a box of tissues.

—Here, sweetheart, wipe your eyes, blow your nose.

—Francesco, I love you so much, but it kills me that you let people take advantage of you. When you go into a deep depression, I suffer. I pay a heavy price for your depressions. They affect every aspect of my life: my music, my mood, and my spirit. I have trouble concentrating. All this bullshit with Elaine and Angelique has me very upset. I made mistakes in tonight's performance I never make. Most people didn't notice, but I did, and that's what counts.

—I'm sorry, said Francesco, rubbing Michiko's back. I rarely hear you make a mistake even when you're practicing..

—I do when I'm emotionally distraught because of you. Fortunately, tonight's errors were very minor, but hurtful to my ego. I worry about our relationship at these times. I can't let you ruin my career, but when you are good you are so good for me.

—Well, it hurts me to see you weeping on my account. The last thing I want to do is upset you.

Francesco sat massaging Michiko's upper back.

—Will you make me a tea with lemon? asked Michiko.

—Of course. Do you want some ice cream? I bought some yesterday from the restaurant that makes their own.

—I would love that.

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Frank parked the borrowed van down the street from Anatoly Gringovitch's brownstone on 3rd Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn. He removed a large five-foot square painting from the back and locked the van. Gringovitch had invited Francesco to his home/studio in Park Slope. Gringovitch's wife and two sons were spending school spring recess in their Paris apartment.

Frank followed Gringovitch up to the top floor of the brownstone where he had his painting studio.

—What a great studio, said Frank. Beautiful north light, spacious and so well organized.

—Put that painting on the big easel, said Gringovitch.

He stepped back to take the full measure of the painting. He studied it silently for perhaps ten, fifteen minutes.

—Well? asked Frank.

Anatoly Gringovitch strode across his studio gesturing at Frank's canvas.

—Now that's a hell-of-a-painting, Frank, he said. Those colors are engaged in warfare. How the hell did you do that?

—Hey, said Frank, happy to be called Frank, you know I'm crazy. I had this vision and I painted it. I call this series my color-modulation paintings

—It's op art without the tricks. What a great painting. When did you paint it?

—About a month ago.

—Has Elaine seen this?

—No, Angelique told me, no more deliveries to Elaine until she's paid up.

—Smart. How much does she still owe you?

—It's down to less than ten grand. It was \$35,000. Elaine is scared I'll leave her.

—Rightly so. I saw the woman she has running Aster Place, her gallery in Paris. Her name is Isabella Sanitizzare. She'd give a pecker to a dead man. She's one hot babe.

—Jesus, Anatoly, where'd you get that one: pecker to a dead man?

—From an old schoolmate. It's an old Chicago saying about drop dead gorgeous women.

—Michiko was in Paris last month and visited the gallery. Michiko warned me never to go there. Now I know why. Since I haven't fired her, Michiko thinks I've been screwing Elaine.

—Well?

—Four years ago, we got it on one night.

—How is she?
—She's a great cook and fakes a great orgasm.
—Fakes?
—I've never known a woman to make that much noise.
—Some do, you know. Want a beer, or a whisky?
Francesco, wanted a whisky, but thought better of it.
—Beer.
—Two beers coming up, said Gringovitch walking over to a small refrigerator in his studio. *Leffe Blonde* okay?
—Never heard of it.
—Belgium. The best.
The two men clinked bottles.
—Man, this is a good beer. Where do you get it?
—There's a distributor over in Maspeth on the Brooklyn-Queens boarder. He has all types of beers. I buy it by the case. You need a car though.
—Did Angelique talk to you? asked Francesco.
—No, about what?
—As you can probably guess, Elaine is in financial difficulties. She wants to sell you at her Aster Place gallery in Paris. Your dealer, Dan Sarras, owes Angelique big-time. Angelique is working to convince Sarras to let Elaine sell you in Paris, but only in Paris, not in her New York gallery. Sarras said he would give her 5% of the sale price. Elaine wants 10%.
—If she doesn't pay, what difference does it make?
—She's paying now. If she doesn't, Angelique will shut her down.
—You know, Frank, she spoke to me in Paris asking me to let her sell my stuff. I told her fugetaboutit, said Gringovitch in a heavy Brooklyn accent
—Did you fuck her?
—No, but from what you report, maybe I should have.
—Well, I'm asking you as a favor to me, let her sell your paintings at Aster Place in Paris.
Gringovitch walked over to the window and looked out onto 3rd Street.

—Jesus, there's some guy trying to steal my car.

Gringovitch bolted down the stairs with Frank on his heels. Gringovitch took a pistol from his downstairs office desk and a baseball bat from the umbrella stand by the front door. He gave the bat to Francesco.

—Get away from that car, you fuckin' junkie.

Gringovitch fired three shots in the air. The thief hightailed it down the street.

—Goddamn junkies. Heroin has ruined the neighborhood.

—Do I have to own a gun to live in Brooklyn?

—Probably. Hell, to be an artist you need a gun.

—I don't have one, but I kicked the living shit out of some muggers who attacked Michiko on Greene Street in SoHo a few years back.

—I believe that. You're strong as a bull.

—I'm just a Wisconsin farm boy.

—Right. You're the guy that took five cops and a tranquilizer dart to subdue.

Gringovitch reloaded his pistol and put it back in his desk.

—After that, I need a whisky, said Gringovitch. Want one Frank?

—Hell yes. The adrenaline is pumping.

They sat in Gringovitch's front parlor. There was a huge samovar on a long ornate coffee table. Large Gringovitch abstract paintings hung on the walls. The furnishings were opulent pre-revolution Russian.

—Do you play the piano? asked Frank walking over to the Beckstein grand in the bay window.

—No, my wife, Francesca does, and Zeno my youngest son. Some Venetian Jews who my father-in-law saved during World War II gave Francesca's father that piano as payment for smuggling them out of Italy to Palestine. Rumor has it, he was a veritable Italian Rhett Butler during the war. Israel has named him Righteous Among The Nations. Amazing life he led.

—I'll have to bring Michiko here so she can try it.

—Bring Michiko next time you visit. She can play to her heart's content. My musician friend, Ben Clarone, says it's one in a million.

—You mean *the* Ben Clarone the jazz musician? How the hell do you know Ben Clarone?

—We grew up together in Chicago. He lived two houses away from me.

—I really feel like a country bumpkin. I only knew apples and farmers growing up. My best friend was my boarder collie, Happy. He was a helluva smart dog, but not famous.

Frank took a swallow of whisky.

—So, man, do you think you'll let Elaine sell your paintings in Paris?

—That's totally up to Sarras. He's my exclusive dealer. If he works out a deal with Elaine, I'll give her some paintings. Sarras has to take the hit for Elaine's take. I want my 50% no matter who sells my work.

—I hear you, bro.

To be continued.

