

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 37

by Daniel Harris

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Frank paced the office of Dr. Andrea Jawarski at Bellevue Hospital. He despised the woman, and the session was idiotic. Jawarski kept telling him he had to take his lithium; he kept telling her he wouldn't.

—Why are there bars on the windows? asked Frank, changing the subject.

—To keep the patients in and unwanted visitors out, said Jawarski folding her hands on her desk in a deliberate manner, not unlike Nazi interrogation officers in films.

—Aren't you supposed to write down what we say, or at least take notes?

Jawarski looked at Frank.

—Mr. Martin, I'm the doctor, you're the patient.

—I almost forgot.

—Frank, stop with the negativity, all you've said is no. All I've said is yes.

—Sounds like the Beatles song "Hello, Goodbye."

—Sit down, I'll ask different questions.

—Will you write down my answers?

—I'll summarize them for my files and later reference.

Frank moved the leather reclining chair so that he didn't have to look at Jawarski, but could see her if he turned his head.

—Frank, how is your sex life?

—Jesus, why would you ask that? My dick works just fine.

—Well, do you have sex with your girlfriend, or is your sex life masturbation.

—You're some piece of work, Dr. Jawarski. Our sex life is fine. We have sex frequently. Almost every time we sleep together, which is not too often because she's on the road performing most of the time.

—So do you have sex with other women or?

—Or what? And why does it matter? Leave my sex life out of this. The problem is with my head not my cock.

—I think you have a borderline schizoid personality disorder. We call it SPD, which sounds better than schizoid. Most laymen confuse schizoid with schizophrenia. Do you have many friends? Are you intimate with other people?

—Am I intimate with other people? What's that supposed to mean? Look, I work alone at my art every day for long hours.

—Are you close to your friends?

—If you mean, do I hug and kiss people when I meet them, no I don't do those things. It offends me. I don't like to be touched by strangers. I just don't like most people. They don't live in my world. My world is a very private place. My art comes from that world. You are trying to take that world away from me with your lithium therapy.

—Frank that's not a good way to live. We are social animals; we need the society of other humans. It balances our life. You especially with all the solitary hours you spend in your loft.

—Maybe you need that, but I could care less. I love Michiko and have a few artist and former teacher friends. But I rarely see them. I think I manage just fine. You forget, I'm a creative artist. I'm not an M.D., schoolteacher or scientist. I come from a family of few words. Farmers lead mostly solitary lives.

—Do you mean you rarely see your friends or former teachers?

—Yes. I love solitude. When I'm manic, being with friends means trouble.

—For your emotional and mental well-being, you need to engage with society.

—But society doesn't want to engage with me. I'm perfectly happy with the society of myself. When I'm working, Bouncer, my cat is as close to another living thing as I want to get.

—I'm not so sure that's correct. Michiko and Elaine say when you give master classes or critiques, you are entertaining, witty and fully engaged with your audience.

—That's a performance. They're not my friends. Michiko taught me how to separate a performance from my life.

—I'm sure many people who attend your classes and lectures would love to count you as a friend or acquaintance.

—If they want to engage with me, they should buy my art. I put everything I have into my art. Look Dr. Jawarski, you got where you are by memorizing a lot of information. I got where I am by creating art from nothing. There is no way a person with your background could understand a creative person like me.

Frank stood and began pacing the room.

—The reason you're here today, Frank, is that Michiko called and is worried that you're not painting. She told me you were in a serious depression for almost three months. That puts a huge strain on her.

—Not oil painting, right, but lots of drawings and watercolors.

—Why not painting? You're a fantastic painter. Is Michiko correct, are you still hovering in a depression?

—I don't think so, but your friend Elaine Aster devastated me when I discovered she was stealing from me, and then refused to sell my new canvases. Even you, Dr. Jawarski would be depressed if they took your license from you. Imagine, my gallerist stealing from me? Your friend Elaine Aster, my gallerist, rejects my new work. Refuses to sell it. Christ! How insensitive are you?

Jawarski was taken aback by this news.

—What, Elaine rejected your paintings? Tell me more about this. Did she give a reason?

—The paintings are too good and too big for her clientele, or some such bullshit. That nearly killed me. Here I keep that bitch's gallery

afloat with my art, and she screws me, not only by theft but also by censorship!

—Frank, listen to me, if you had been taking your lithium, you would have been able to handle that setback. Maybe even convince Elaine how wrong she was to make that decision. You need to take your lithium. You will lose Michiko and your career if you don't balance your life. Your depressions are pathological. Thankfully, we've managed to control your manic episodes.

—Fuck that. The Chinese medicine works. Lithium will end my career.

—I can't help you if you don't follow my directions.

—Fuck you and your directions. I'm a painter, fucked up or not; my art comes from a deep place in my psyche. I don't want you fucking with the very guts of my soul. I will not take lithium. I'll take the Chinese medicine. It works, and I can paint when I take it. Not so when I take lithium.

—Francesco, I'm warning you, next time you go into a deep depression, it's electro-shock therapy.

—Try me. Just fucking try me.

—That's delusional thinking, Francesco.

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The Chinese doctor practiced out of a traditional oriental medicine pharmacy on East Broadway in Chinatown. Dr. Li Wong was degreed from respected medical schools in China in both western and eastern medicines. He was taller than the typical Chinese one sees in New York City, over six feet. He carried his slender frame with perfect posture. Thick rimless glasses framed alert kind eyes. A long stringy goatee dangled from his chin like a worn squirrel tail trophy. The skin on his face was taut and healthy. His wife and daughter filled prescriptions and dispensed health advice to the mostly Chinese women customers. To see Dr. Wong, you needed an appointment.

Frank didn't have an appointment, but he hoped Dr. Wong would see him. Frank was confident Wong would give him better advice than what he just suffered through at Jawarski's.

—Ying/Yang out of balance, said Wong examining Frank's open mouth. No good.

—What does that mean?

—Smoke. No good. Eat meat. No good. Your body, your body, repeated Wong, searching for English words, a cemetery of animals.

—What, you want me only to eat grass?

—Plants. Live like a cow. Cow no have demons.

—How do you know?

Wong gave Frank a tight smile. He held up the vial of Frank's urine.

—This color? Not good. Healthy man. Healthy man. No color.

—What should I do?

—Take medicine. No smoke. No meat. Fish one day by week. No alcohol. Alcohol poison.

Frank stared at Dr. Wong. Did Wong know what he was talking about?

Wong held Frank's wrist.

—Much confusion. Your body. Bad nerves. Change diet. I give new medicine.

Frank walked through the pharmacy garnering stares from the Chinese woman shoppers. Out on East Broadway, all the craziness of the Lower East Side and Chinatown gobsmacked him. The press of humanity on the sidewalk caused him to break out in a sweat. The thought of riding a crowded rush-hour subway was too overwhelming. He began walking to his loft. He didn't want to go home and tell Michiko about his afternoon with the medical community. Maybe after a few beers, but not now.

To be continued.

