

# The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

## Chapter 38

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### \* \* \* **Manhattan, Summer 1975**

—Francesco, I wish you would give up smoking, said Michiko, watching Francesco tamp down a pack of Camels on the back of his wrist. I know it gives you enjoyment, but I really don't like the taste of your mouth on my mouth when you smoke.

—You know it gives me great pleasure, said Francesco, unwrapping the fresh pack. I've already given up smoking after sex because you don't like the smell of tobacco in the bedroom, and I don't smoke in the bathroom anymore.

—Well, if you can give up those times, why can't you give up all times?

—Easier said than done. You know, when I'm painting, I like to contemplate my work, sitting and enjoying a smoke.

—And a beer.

—Yes, and a beer. You know Michiko, I work long and hard, don't deny me these small pleasures.

—Yes, yes. But I don't like it. I want you to quit.

—After this pack.

Michiko took a sip of her tea. Francesco studied her face. He wondered what she was thinking. She was on a quit smoking trip again. It's not like they were married though they'd lived together for seven years. Francesco lit his cigarette, tilted his head back and blew the smoke straight up.

—You're not listening, Francesco.

—I hear you. What about you? If I quit smoking what's in it for me?

—For one, your breath and clothes will smell better. The apartment won't smell like an ashtray, and you'll be healthier. You should go back to cycling again, or you'll get fat.

All she said was true, but it meant he would be a monster to live with for a few weeks. He had quit once before, gained twenty pounds and his first wife split.

She left, and he started smoking again. Quitting was a game of threes: Three hours, three days, three weeks, three months, three years. If you made it to three years, you were smoke-free.

Michiko was one of those Japanese women with a beautiful face, but a young girl's figure; not that she didn't have a bust, but her hips were girlish. She had probably gained ten or twelve pounds since they began living together. The upside was that her bust was noticeably larger, but she had the beginnings of a belly.

—If I quit smoking, what personal improvement program are you going to start?

—Do I need one?

—I didn't mean to imply you needed one, but if I'm making sacrifices, maybe you could do something so we can suffer together.

—Francesco, you are some piece of work. I am the most beautiful woman you have ever had, I am a great cook, one of the busiest concert music pianists in New York City, and I keep the house immaculate.

—I think Katy, the maid, keeps the house immaculate.

—Well, I hire her, and I pay her.

—True. You cover for me when my cash runs low.

—That's because you spend all your money on your art supplies and buying your impoverished friends meals and art supplies.

Francesco stubbed out his cigarette, annoyed that they were squabbling.

—I'll bet you can stop right now. Give me the pack.

Francesco saw that she was determined. He wished he had taken another drag on his cigarette. He handed her the pack.

—And the matches.

He handed over the matches.

She took her teacup and poured enough tea into the cigarette pack to drown the cigarettes. She stuffed the matches into the soggy pack.

—I bet you feel better already.

—Michiko, I just exhaled the last drag. Wait till the nicotine monkey jumps on my back. I'll be unbearable.

Michiko put the drowned cigarettes on the saucer of her teacup, carried it into the kitchen, where she tossed the drowned pack into the trash.

—That's it. Francesco, your smoking life is over. Now take a shower and brush your teeth. Use the body wash I brought from Milan. Then meet me in the bedroom.

Michiko snuggled close to him. He was getting a serious cigarette jones. No two ways about it, when she wanted to deliver great sex, she could deliver great sex. But right now he craved a smoke.

—Francesco, do you think I'm getting fat?

—Michiko, you are hardly fat. Maybe you've gained a few pounds, but now you have shapely breasts.

—I saw a picture of myself in *Musical America*, playing at Miller Theater and I noticed I had the makings of a belly. Esther, the cellist, pointed it out to me. I'd be afraid to wear that sheath dress again.

—You're not pregnant are you?

—Hardly, I just had a period, as you know.

This was the opening Francesco needed.

—Maybe, while I'm suffering from nicotine withdrawal, you can go on a diet. Nothing drastic, maybe you could drop six or eight pounds. I'm going to have to watch my diet, or I'll gain big-time.

—I only weigh 120 pounds. When you met me, I weighed 110. I need some of the extra weight for stamina.

—I don't know about that, my dear. At 110 pounds, you had more than enough stamina to play twenty-two solo concerts in twenty-two cities in less than a month.

—I was younger then.

Francesco laughed.

—My old lady of thirty-two. Should I order up a wheelchair?  
Michiko flung a pillow at him.

—You're so bad.

—I love it when you get mad. Makes me hot.

—Everything makes you hot.

—Only you, Michiko.

—Remember Stephanie, the mezzo-soprano who came here to rehearse *Carmen*? asked Michiko.

—She's a serious love-by-the-pound girl.

—Francesco, be nice, that's just plain mean. She's a very talented singer, just a little heavy to play the gypsy Carmen, but veracity of body type is not required in opera.

—Well, what about Stephanie?

—If you saw her now, you would not recognize her. She is now a perfectly svelte Carmen.

—I don't believe it. You're being generous.

—No, I'll show you her picture in the June *Opera News* as Carmen at the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Michiko left the bedroom and returned with the June issue of *Opera News*. Frank loved to watch her walk when she was naked. She rocked up on her toes like a young filly, holding her arms and hands gracefully. He drew her walking nude dozens of times but never perfectly captured that elusive gait.

—Look. Can you believe it? Here is Stephanie six months later.

—Man, she looks great. No more *zaftig* diva. How did she do that?

—The gossip is that she went to some special *clinique* in Paris, and they gave her a tapeworm.

—Yuck! Have you ever seen one? They are these long segmented beasts with a big head called a scolex, said Francesco.

—I guess it only lives inside you for a couple of months, and then they remove it. But while it's in there, it eats most of your food, so you lose weight.

—That sounds gross and unhealthy.

—I think it's one of those old European things, said Michiko. Supposedly, Maria Callas did it.

—Sounds like something you'd read in *The National Inquirer*. You know: **Weight Loss Secrets of the Stars**.

—Well, if we are going on this weight loss campaign, maybe we should try it.

—I don't think so.

To be continued.

