

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 39

by Daniel Harris

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Manhattan, January 1976

Francesco had gathered up the remaining glasses from the previous night's party, put them in the dishwasher, took out the trash and cleaned up as well as he could without running the vacuum cleaner. Last night's gathering was a heady mix of New York City's emerging musicians and artists, their spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends and a few art and music insiders. There were more than forty people attending the party in their apartment, which was large, but not particularly spacious since Michiko's two grand pianos occupied most of the living room.

It was noon when Michiko came into the kitchen and put a kettle of water on the stove for tea.

—Francesco, did you come to bed last night?

—No, I had to put Morty in a cab at five-thirty this morning. He had a seven o'clock flight to LA. I hope we didn't wake you.

—No, I was sleeping soundly. I have a trio concert at the Frick this afternoon at three. I'm going to need the bathroom for the next hour. Can you make sure it's clean?

—I gave it a quick cleaning. Morty is a messy guy.

—He's a slob. To tell you the truth, I never want Morton Slobovian in my apartment again. He's obnoxious, argumentative, messy, smells bad, and has no respect for women. I may be the only woman last night who wasn't groped by that creep. Never invite him here again.

—He was my painting teacher at SAIC. I can't just cut him off.

—I don't care. This is my apartment. You stopped living in your downtown loft to live with me in my apartment. I am the gatekeeper here.

—Michiko, don't be so harsh. Some of your musician friends were hardly saints last night. Actually, you and I were the grown-ups compared to our guests.

—Hard for me to believe you could tell. You were talking pretty loud and had put away an industrial quantity of Scotch.

—Don't be so high and mighty. You and two of your girlfriends were the only ones drinking the champagne. All six bottles were dead soldiers this morning.

—I'm sure we had help from some of your boorish friends.

Francesco had no desire to fight with Michiko. He was too groggy. He could tell a doozy of a headache was looming. At least he didn't smoke; he would be suffering from cottonmouth and sore throat to go with his headache.

—I'll double-check the bathroom. Do you want me to start a bath for you?

—That would be helpful. Use the lavender bath beads. But make sure the tub is really clean.

Francesco polished the bathroom fixtures and disinfected the sink, bathtub, and the toilet. While he was cleaning the bathroom, Michiko practiced a few passages from the music she was playing that afternoon. Francesco loved to hear her play. He was proud of her abilities and her career. She had mixed feelings about his paintings. As Michiko's Caucasian painter boyfriend, he did not impress her traditional Japanese parents. When they read that one of his paintings sold at auction for \$45,000, they treated them to a week at their second home in Japan. He didn't tell them he only received \$13,000 of that amount.

—Francesco, would you please get me a cab. I'm running late. I'll meet you in front in five minutes.

Francesco knew five minutes meant fifteen, so he put on his second-hand thick wool overcoat, heavy boots and took the elevator

to the street. The front door was open, and the doorman was not there.

Their apartment was on West 81st, across from the American Museum of Natural History. He flagged a cab. He had just finished telling the driver it would be a few minutes for his wife to arrive when Michiko came up behind him. She wore a dark crimson suit and had on her full-length mink coat. Her dress shoes and music were in a Vuitton leather bag.

—There is a reception after the concert. I'll probably be home around seven.

—You look beautiful. How about a kiss?

—No, you'll mess my lipstick. I'm late. I'll see you later, sweetheart. Get some sleep.

The driver made a U-turn and headed across Central Park on the 79th Street Traverse.

Francesco woke when Michiko unlocked the apartment door.

—Francesco, why are all the lights off?

—Sorry, I fell asleep on the couch. How was the concert?

—Mostly excellent. I don't think I ever want to play with Mandy again. She is such a vainglorious bitch. She thinks she is God's gift to music.

—Didn't she win some big violin competition?

—Yes, but there are rumors.

—Can't you girls get along? You're always bickering with each other.

Michiko went into the bedroom and closed the door. Francesco waited for fifteen minutes. Michiko didn't come out. Sometimes after a concert she was in a foul mood and wanted to be left alone. Other times she wanted ravenous sex. He couldn't tell which way things would play out today. He tapped his fingers on the bedroom door.

—Come in, Francesco.

She was under the covers. She had thrown her dress and underwear on the bench at her dressing table. She had lit a candle next to the bed.

—Take off your clothes.

Francesco usually liked to make sure Michiko was well satisfied before he took his full pleasure of her. Tonight, she only wanted to give him as many pleasures and stimulations as she could. She was very skilled. Ultimately, she took some pleasures, but she left him totally spent.

They lay on the bed. He pulled the covers over them.

—Francesco, I have something to tell you.

He couldn't imagine what it would be. Even though it was over six months since he quit smoking, he had worked especially hard at keeping a good disposition. He avoided conflict and cheerfully performed the annoying chores and errands she demanded when she was under stress or suffered performance anxiety.

—Good news or bad?

—I want you to move out.

It was as if a professional boxer had punched him in the solar plexus. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head. Michiko moved an inch away, so they were not touching.

—Is there some reason for this? Did I do something to hurt you? Is there another man?

—I don't want to discuss it. When I'm ready to talk to you about it, I'll call you. I'm leaving Tuesday for Chicago. I return Sunday night. I want you completely moved out when I return.

—Can you tell me why? Don't I at least deserve that?

—Maybe in a few weeks. I don't want to speak about it.

—Should I leave now?

—There's a guest coming. He's a former classmate and a cellist with the Chicago Symphony. They played at Carnegie Hall this afternoon. I must get dressed and prepare dinner.

— I'm devastated. No way I can eat. I'll leave.

—Please leave me *The Nude Pianist*. I would hate for someone else to own it.

—I guess that's your legacy of our relationship?

He left the bed and dressed. He could hear Michiko quietly weeping. He took one of his backpacks and stuffed it with toiletries and clothes. He gently closed and locked the apartment door when he left.

When he arrived on the first floor, the doorman was talking to a man with a cello case. He was a tall, handsome man who spoke with an Israeli accent.

—Armando, said Francesco to the doorman, I'm going away for a few days. I'll be back on Thursday.

—OK, Francesco, said Armando. You're a brave man to leave Michiko alone with this handsome gentleman.

—Hello, said the man with the cello, I'm Mikhael Hadda. Michiko invited me for dinner tonight.

—Yes, said Francesco. I have another engagement. I'm sorry. She is a splendid cook.

Francesco took the Eighth Avenue local train to Columbus Circle where he changed to the downtown local number 1 IRT train. At Times Square, he switched to the Broadway local. He exited at Prince Street. He walked toward his studio on Greene Street. The slush on the narrow sidewalks was starting to freeze. He walked in the street.

The neighborhood was changing. The artists who had moved into the nearly abandoned buildings ten years before were afraid they would lose their lofts. The real estate marketers adopted an urban planner's name for the neighborhood and advertised it as SoHo, for "South of Houston." Once the area became fashionable, none of them would be able to afford to live and work here.

He walked into The Maple Tavern. He ordered a shot and a bottle of Bass, bought a pack of Camels, tapped down the pack and lit his first cigarette in over six months. It tasted wonderful. It even gave him a slight buzz.

To be continued.

