

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 41

by Daniel Harris

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Manhattan, March 1, 1976

Angelique Brody found Francesco sitting at the bar in The Maple Tavern. Frank was about to take the first bite of a chicken salad sandwich.

—Francesco, what are you doing here? she said stopping his arm from reaching his mouth.

—I'm hungry, he said, regarding the sandwich in his hand.

—We were supposed to have a business lunch uptown. It's the meeting about your solo show at the Whitney Museum.

—I forgot, he said, still looking hungrily at the sandwich. My luck has been so bad; it's probably better if you handle this by yourself.

—Forgot! Your first solo show at a major museum and you forgot!

—It happens, said Francesco still holding his sandwich. You take care of it.

—Nonsense, said Angelique. No one knows your work better than you. No one can talk about it better than you. Let's go. We're late.

—I have to pay the bill.

—Here's ten dollars. Tell them to wrap it to go. You can have it later.

—Frank, said Big Jack, the bartender, I'll keep it in the refrigerator. You can pick it up tonight.

—Thanks, Jack.

—My car is on Greene Street in front of your loft, said Angelique, pulling Francesco's arm to make him walk faster.

—Are my painting clothes okay?

Angelique appraised his attire.

—Why don't you change into some clean clothes and a jacket?

When Francesco entered Angelique's limo, he was dressed in a work shirt, Levis, and a leather jacket. He still wore his hiking boots.

—First stop, Grillo Moving and Storage, said Angelique to her driver.

—Yes, Ms. Brody.

—We're meeting the curator and the director there, she said to Francesco. I've set up an exhibit of ten of your best new paintings.

Francesco wished he'd eaten the chicken salad sandwich. He'd been painting since six that morning, and it was now after 1 p.m.

—How soon will I get to eat, he asked.

—Are you that hungry?

—I didn't eat last night. I worked until midnight and started again at six this morning.

—Didn't you eat breakfast?

—I rarely do. I had coffee. I fed the cat, though, said Francesco, smiling.

—We'll get you two slices of pizza at Sacco's on Ninth Avenue, she said. It's around the corner from the warehouse.

—I hope it's good.

—One of the best slice places, said the driver. I grab a slice there often.

The driver pulled the Mercedes in front of Sacco's. Francesco exited and walked up to the street window.

—Two slices and black coffee to go, said Francesco to the counterman, a short, burly apron-clad Italian kid wearing a Yankee's baseball cap.

The counterman cut two slices from a big cooked pie, put them in the top oven and in one motion turned and poured coffee into an I Love NY paper cup.

—That'll be \$1.10, said the counterman. You got pizza in two minutes.

Francesco gave the man two dollars. The counterman gave him change. Francesco put a quarter in the tip jar.

The counterman checked the slices. He took a pizza peel, twirled it in his hand and expertly slipped it under the slices, putting the peel onto the counter. He slid each slice onto a paper plate.

—There's grated Parmigiano, garlic powder, dried hot pepper and oregano in those shakers if you want to add them, said the counterman, indicating the shakers. I put napkins in the bag.

Francesco shook a generous portion of each onto both slices. The counterman deftly slid the two paper plates into a white paper bag.

—Thanks, man, said Francesco, putting a hand under the bag to keep the slices right side up.

—Come again. It's great pizza, said the counterman.

Angelique's driver opened the street side rear door for Francesco.

—Wanna bite? asked Francesco of Angelique.

—Oh, no. I have to watch my figure. At my age just smelling that pizza can put on a pound or two.

—You look like you've been working on your figure. Have you lost some weight?

—I'm going to St. Thomas for a vacation next Tuesday, and I plan to wear a bikini.

—Not many fifty-year-old women can wear a bikini, said Francesco, but I think you'll turn a few heads.

—Thank you, Francesco, that's kind.

—Maybe I should document your slim figure on canvas, said Francesco, starting on the second slice. This is great slice pizza.

—Francesco, don't wolf down your food. I'm 49 years old not 50. I don't pose nude for artists.

—You're not a prude are you?

—No, I just don't do that.

—Just a thought.

Francesco could see that the idea of a nude portrait was working on Angelique.

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The meeting with the curator and the assistant director of the Whitney went well. They were impressed with Francesco's new

paintings and were anxious to arrange for a solo show. But they needed more paintings.

—How many more, asked Francesco.

—For that gallery, we will need at least twenty-five paintings this size, or more if there are smaller ones.

—Angelique, how many paintings are still in storage?

—There are another ten here, said Angelique. I have his portfolio in my briefcase. I have to give the warehouse guys two days notice to retrieve and uncrate the paintings.

Maria Monsanto, the Whitney curator, flipped through the portfolio.

—Angelique, is this the same portfolio you sent over last month, asked Maria, a petite, intense Argentinean woman impeccably dressed in a suit, scarf and sensible heels.

—There are two new paintings in this portfolio. I can give you those pages.

—What about some earlier work, asked the assistant director, a large man wearing a brown suit, sports shirt with no tie, and athletic shoes.

—All sold, or at Elaine Aster's Paris gallery, said Angelique.

—Elaine has two of my paintings in Paris, said Francesco. She is no longer my gallerist, but they are hers to sell.

—Do you have a list of owners of Francesco's recent paintings, asked the curator.

—Of course, said Angelique. I keep track of the changing provenance of all my artists' works.

—Can you give us the list and photos, asked Maria. If we are interested in some of those paintings, we will contact the owners to see if they'll give permission to have their paintings in this exhibit.

Frank liked Maria. She seemed genuinely interested in his art and in making a success of his proposed solo show.

—This is what we should do, said the blustering assistant director. Maria, Angelique and Francesco you should draw up a list of the paintings you want for the exhibit. We should start gathering the paintings now. Meanwhile, Angelique and Maria should track down

sold paintings. We need to know by June if we have sufficient depth and quality for a solo show.

—Oh, be assured, I've painted plenty of paintings, said Francesco.

—Yes, said Maria, but we prefer your recent works with maybe one or two earlier ones that are precursors to your current style.

—I am working on a new series of paintings I'm calling *Atmospheres*. They are more than twice the size of the other recent works and descend from that style. I would love to have them in the show. Forget the earlier work. You will be excited by the new paintings.

—I'll call you about making a studio visit, said Maria. I'd like to see what you're painting now.

—Anytime. I work in my studio ten to twelve hours a day. I also live there.

—Well, if we're through here, said the Director, I have to go. There's a board meeting later this afternoon and a fundraiser tonight. Maria, you'll have to give a preliminary report to the board this afternoon.

—May I keep this portfolio? asked Maria.

—Of course, replied Angelique.

—What's wrong, Francesco, asked Angelique as she and Francesco walked to her car.

—I thought we were going to have lunch.

—I spent an hour and a half looking for you, she said giving him a stern look. They ate lunch without us.

—Well, there's always my chicken salad sandwich at The Maple Tavern.

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April 28, 1976

—Hello, said Francesco answering the phone in his studio.

—Francesco, this is Elaine Aster. Turn on your TV.

—I don't have a TV.

—Well, turn on your radio to a news station.

—Elaine, said Francesco, why are you calling me?

—I have terrible news. The art world has lost a giant.

—What do you mean?

—Angelique Brody was killed in a plane crash at Harry S. Truman Airport in St. Thomas yesterday afternoon. There was a newsflash about American Airlines flight 625 overrunning the runway. There were survivors, but Angelique is not one of them.

—You're fucking lying.

—I wish I were. Angelique Brody, your lawyer and gallerist, is dead.

—That's a cold way to put it.

—Francesco, you are going to need me now more than ever, said Elaine in a voice both stark and threatening. You should rejoin my gallery. Think about it.

Frank hung up the telephone, placing the handset on the receiver as if it had special powers. He felt like he had been kicked in the balls. On his worktable next to the telephone was a broadsheet-sized sketchbook, filled with sketches of Angelique Brody in dozens of poses dressed and nude. They had spent the previous weekend in her apartment in an orgy of sketching, laughing, cooking and loving romps. She called it her second youth. Now she was dead, charred almost beyond recognition.

He lay on his back in the bedroom. He could smell the faint odor of her custom perfume on his work shirt. He didn't weep, but tears welled up in his eyes. Bounder jumped on the bed and walked up onto his chest. He stroked Bounder, who began to purr.

When he awoke, it was dark and Bounder wanted food.

—What's going to happen to us now, Bounder? We're losing our home; we've lost our best friend. What are we going to do?

To be continued.

