

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 44

by Daniel Harris

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Red Hook, Brooklyn, May 1976

When the three women arrived at Francesco's Red Hook building, Francesco suggested the driver park the car inside the building. The local street criminals frequently boosted the radios and other electronics from parked cars. To break into a car, they would break the driver's side window, an annoying and expensive repair.

Francesco had arranged his *Atmospheres* paintings, including the unfinished ones, so as to create an environment. He arranged them in a square lit with powerful lighting instruments. The effect was immediate. There were gasps from the three women. After a long silence, as the women studied each of the sixteen paintings, there was a collective exhale.

—Francesco, said Susan Ramsey, these are the most amazing paintings. They overwhelm me with their power. They are visceral. The variety of blues on this canvas here remind me of the light changing on the Mediterranean sea.

—It's more powerful than that, said Isabella Sanitizzare, they make all my senses vibrate. I not only see them, but it's as if I can hear, smell and taste them. They are alive, but each in a unique yet unified way. The butterscotch on that painting makes me want to lick the canvas. I can taste my mother's butterscotch ice cream.

—Yes, said Elaine Aster, but you painted them as large public pronouncements. They are too large for most collectors. They are for a public space. Francesco's previous series was too large for my clients and way too large for my galleries either in New York or

Paris. This series is outrageous! Paintings this size are meant for castles or churches, not private homes.

Francesco looked at the three women with lust in his eye. Even Susan looked good to him today. He was upbeat about his work and was not about to get depressed by Elaine's comments. He knew he was making great art. In fact, these painting would enter the permanent collection of MOMA, but many years later.

—Well, thank you, ladies, said Francesco. I've made some tea for you and bought some cookies at the best Italian bakery in Carroll Gardens. I also have some locally made chocolate gelato.

—Francesco, asked Isabella, could you tell me how you came to paint these pictures? They are so different from the ones I've been selling in Paris.

—Well, Elaine caused me great pain when she rejected my color-modulation paintings, which she said were too large for her clientele. I fell into a psychotic depression, something not good for me, or my then relationship with the piano virtuoso, Michiko. Michiko ultimately threw me out. When I came out of my depression, and I'm sure none of you have experienced that terrifying black hole, I thought my previous painting life had left me. I was lost. So I started painting in a new way, more deeply concerned with how a painting could affect the viewer. How a painting could change the viewer's life. Maybe even alter biorhythms as they engaged with the painting. I was looking to have the viewer experience something beyond the surface, beyond the paint, maybe even beyond life. I wanted paint to move people in a spiritual and physical way, make them happy, sad, sexy, joyous, and anxious; you name the state. I believe these paintings achieve that. Whether you can sell them, I don't care. I had to paint these pictures. These three over here are unfinished. They and the others will be in my Whitney solo show in October. I really don't care if you can't sell them. They have to exist. Do you commercial people understand where I'm coming from? I didn't paint these for money, I painted them because people need them, and I need them. All these sixteen paintings must be exhibited together. Collectively they make a statement about our universal

commonalities: birth, life, death and so on. I call this series of paintings *Atmospheres*.

The three women stood there taken aback by the Francesco's intensity.

—Francesco, said Isabella, can you choose one of these paintings and show it to us alone by itself. Not with the others?

—For you, anything, said Francesco, giving Isabella a wink. Which one do you wish to see as a stand-alone?

—How about that one — the yellow, white and blue painting, said Isabella.

Francesco moved the painting and its easel to another part of his large studio. He retrieved five more lights from his storage area. He covered the lights with diffusing filters and measured the light falling on the painting with a light meter. After many measurements with the light meter and adjustments to the lights, he stepped back so the women could view the picture. He could tell the women were impressed with his attention to detail.

—I could sell that painting in a heartbeat, said Isabella.

—I agree, said Susan. It is powerful just by itself, without the others.

—I disagree, said Elaine. I actually sell paintings. I don't know a dozen collectors who have wall space for a painting this size. My corporate clients wouldn't be interested in these paintings. It's too powerful for a "color-on-the-wall" corporate abstract.

—I disagree, said Isabella, Foundation Maeght, where I've worked as a curator might be very interested. I must know half a dozen museums in France that would snap up this painting.

—Yes, said Elaine, but then they would sell it to enrich their coffers. French museums could care less about a painting like this. It's a short-term investment. French museums have no long-term interest in American painters.

—Elaine might be correct, said Francesco. Much as I'd like to agree with you Isabella, I have to side with Elaine on this. And I would like all sixteen paintings to live together in one gallery. I don't want them sold separately.

—Well, said Susan, it's a hell of a painting. If it could fit in the elevator of my apartment building, I'd buy it today. Though I probably can't afford it. Do you offer terms?

Everyone had a good laugh.

—Well, Professor Ramsey, said Francesco, much as I'd like to sell it to you, I can't give it away. It's a twenty-foot by twelve-foot painting and it cost me a lot in time and materials. I custom compound my paints for this project. It is a labor-intensive process. Even if I gave away my talent, it would probably cost more than a professor could afford in materials.

—Francesco, I was only dreaming.

—I like your dreams, said Francesco, giving Susan a big smile.

—Francesco, said Isabella, your paintings are so different from what anyone is doing today or has ever done, I'm frustrated that I don't have the resources to display your art. What I can do is have these paintings photographed and see if I can arrange an exhibit in France.

—That sounds great, replied Francesco, but Maria Monsanto at the Whitney Museum of American Art has first dibs for my solo show there in October. A possibility is to contact Maria and see if you could arrange a follow-up show somewhere in Europe. She might be interested in having the show travel to a major museum overseas.

—That's an idea, said Isabella, but I'm leaving for Paris tonight. Do you have her telephone numbers? I'll call her from the airport.

—I'll give you her work and home numbers, said Francesco, thumbing through a sketchbook that served as his address book.

Francesco wrote the numbers on a sheet of paper and handed it to Isabella.

—So, ladies, I gather you are not in a position to offer me gallery space for my work.

Francesco's remark made the three women uncomfortable. They shuffled their feet and fidgeted with items in their purses. Elaine lit a cigarette.

—Don't get me wrong, Francesco. These are great paintings, said Elaine. I just don't have the clientele to buy them. It pains me to

pass up the opportunity to be your gallery again. Now I can handle the paintings you showed me last time I was at your Greene Street loft.

—I thought you had plenty of wall space at your new Wooster Street gallery.

—For your previous paintings, yes, but these billboard-sized paintings, no.

—I couldn't exhibit one at Aster Place in Paris, said Isabella, but I'd kill to be able to represent you with these paintings.

If you can throw a decent fuck, I'd give you these paintings, thought Francesco. He was losing it looking at Isabella. She looked like a woman who, in a full rut, could get her hips off the sheets.

—But, Isabella, you don't have a gallery space, said Francesco, except for Aster Place in Paris.

—I won't forget these paintings, Francesco. I'll be on the lookout for a proper exhibit space for them.

—Don't forget, Isabella, scolded Elaine, you work for me.

—You put me in a difficult position, Elaine, said Francesco. I know you were negotiating with Angelique about representing my work. But now you're giving me negative vibes.

—Not so fast, Francesco, said Elaine. I haven't ruled out not representing you. I just can't handle twenty-foot pictures. You have more wall space here than I have in my two galleries. Your previous pictures will fit very nicely in my new gallery. I can show you the contract Angelique sent me before she tragically died.

—I would think, said Francesco, if you believed in these paintings, you would find a way to sell them.

—Francesco! said Elaine. That's rubbish. I love your paintings, and they have made both of us a lot of money. It would take me a year or more to find clients who can buy these paintings. Everyone will love them, but they won't have wall space for them.

—That's bullshit, said Francesco. The Whipplés have lots of wall space and buy large paintings for their homes. I'm sure you know many of their equally rich friends. Angelique did.

—Angelique came from the power elite; she was to the manor born. I come from the only Jewish family in Elk Valley, Wyoming. I fought for my place as a gallery owner. Angelique almost inherited her position. Angelique's mother was a well-known art patron in New York City. I worked my way up from clerk at an art supply store. Give me some credit for ambition and commitment.

—You don't lack for moxie, said Francesco, funding Aster Place in Paris on my back.

—But I paid you all I owed you and I never stopped giving you your monthly retainer until you challenged me.

—Easy, Elaine, said Frank, amazed at his coolness, that's all ancient history.

After Francesco had served tea, cookies and gelato, he showed the three women his color modulation paintings, the ones too large for Elaine's previous gallery on West Broadway in SoHo. Elaine wanted to take all of them immediately, but Francesco knew Dan Sarras was coming that evening. He didn't want to let anything go until after he met with Sarras.

It was after five when the women left. Francesco was exhausted. Trying to sell himself and his paintings was work. He also wanted to bed Isabella, but she was leaving for Paris that night. Elaine was still seething from their tiff about her stealing from him. Susan was married and too pedestrian to be of interest. He grabbed Bounder and gave him a good combing and petting. After he had fed Bounder, he converted his couch to a bed and lay down waiting for Dan Sarras.

Bounder jumped up on his chest and began purring loudly. Bounder could sense Frank's unease. Too much was happening too quickly, his head hurt from the frustration of listening to three women rave about his paintings and then tell him they couldn't sell them.

To be continued.

