

# The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

## Chapter 45

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Frank must have dozed off. He was awakened when Bounder jumped off his chest. Almost immediately, the doorbell rang. He bolted from his bed and ran down to answer the door.

—Who is it, yelled Frank, rubbing his eyes and pushing his hair back from his face.

—Dan Sarras! Open up!

Frank opened the door to see Dan Sarras standing there in a polo shirt and blue jeans. Sarras had parked his windowless Ford Econoline van in front of Frank's garage door.

—You can park your van inside, said Frank. You'll have to back up a couple of feet. It's a swing door, not a retractable door.

—I'll back in. If I buy something, I'll be able to load the van inside.

—Nice neighborhood you live in, Martinelli, said Sarras, exiting the van. How did you convince Zambrano to rent this to you?

—How do you know I'm renting from Zambrano? Did Gringovitch tell you?

—No, Zambrano did, said Sarras, lighting a Sobranie cigarette. Back in a day, we did some business together. But, I'm here to see your work, not socialize.

—I'm not quite set up, said Frank. Some gallery people were here earlier today, and I had to pull out some smaller pieces. You can look at these smaller pieces while I set up the big canvases.

—No need to do that. I can't take the big paintings today. I'm having a salon at the Ritz in Paris in late October. Show me five or

six of your best works that are no larger than five feet on a side. If I find I can sell your work, we'll tackle those big paintings.

—Don't you want to at least see them?

—Maybe later. Show me your stuff. Let's get on with the business at hand.

Frank picked the five best color-modulation paintings he completed at his Greene Street loft. They were the one's Elaine Aster rejected as too big and too radical a change in style for her to sell.

—I like that one, said Sarras, pointing to an orange, purple and black painting. Those colors are dancing on the surface. You're good Martinelli. Very good.

—Thank you. That's one of my favorites, also.

—This one here, I don't know. How did you get that mauve and taupe to have so much action?

—First I see it in my head. Then I paint it. I don't know where it comes from, but there it is.

—You're a funny guy, Martinelli. I hear you're crazy as a loon, but you sure as hell can paint.

—But, I'm not crazy when I paint.

—No shit. You piqued my interest. Show me more. Anatoly told me you were a good painter, but I never thought I'd find someone at his level again in my lifetime.

—Why don't you just go through my storage area, see if anything catches your eye. I'll setup the big paintings.

Frank led Sarras to the back of the studio where there were large shelves divided into bays, each bay held twenty-five canvases. Frank had over two hundred unsold paintings.

—Jesus Christ, is that all you do is paint? That's a lot of work I see here. Don't you fuck or eat?

—I am a working artist. I don't play at being an artist. The more recent paintings are on the lower level of shelves. The bay on the far right has the rest of the paintings in the series you just examined.

Frank left Sarras to explore his work while he rearranged the large *Atmospheres* paintings. When he finished, Frank checked to

see how Sarras was progressing. Sarras had pulled dozens of paintings from the racks and had them leaning on every available wall.

—I painted all these pictures after I left Elaine Aster in 1974, said Frank. I want you to see the recent pieces in my series I'm calling *Atmospheres*.

Sarras stood in the middle of the area surrounded by the big *Atmospheres* canvases. He stood very still and had an intense expression on his face. Frank was afraid to move for fear he would break Sarras's concentration.

Finally, Sarras walked to each painting and studied each one for a long time. Bounder came down to the studio and walked up to Sarras.

—Bounder, leave the man alone. Come, come.

—It's okay, I like cats. What's her name?

—Bounder, and he's a male.

—Beautiful cat, said Sarras, scooping up Bounder and beginning to pet him, while continuing to study the paintings.

Frank could hear Bounder's loud purr halfway across the studio. When Sarras finished examining the paintings, he sat in Frank's Adirondack chair caressing Bounder.

—You know, Martinelli, you're a fucking genius. Just when I thought I figured out how you made those paintings, you fooled me with another variation. It looks easy; but I'm willing to bet, I couldn't go home and make paintings like these, and I'm a first-class painter and a world-class forger.

Frank didn't know how to respond to this unsettling news, so he didn't. He lit a cigarette.

—Don't smoke those fucking Camels. Here have a Sobranie.

—Thanks. You know Anatoly and Elaine Aster both smoke Sobranie cigarettes.

—Where the fuck do you think they found out about Sobranie cigarettes? From me. I had a little fine tobacco import business. Sold it to your landlord Zambrano.

Frank was confused. Why was it every time he met someone new, they knew all the people he did? He felt like he was some anchorite Zen monk. That's what he was, a recluse. What did Dr. Jawarski say: "Frank, I think you are a boarder-line schizoid. You are afraid of relationships with people." Jesus, how far out of the loop am I, he thought. Or maybe this is how you get ahead, meeting people with contacts who have contacts, all of whom can help you. It certainly seems to be the way I've gotten ahead since I met Michiko who introduced me to Sylvestre and then Angelique. Jawarski introduced me to Elaine. Now add Isabella, Maria, Susan, Gringovitch and Sarras to the list. And don't forget Zambrano. Jesus, some of those people are criminals. Fucking art business. Anatoly was correct; Angelique was the only class act in town.

—Here's what I propose, said Sarras, putting Bounder on the floor. I'll take five best of your color-modulation paintings on spec. I'll pay you \$500 each for the five paintings over there. I'll give you 50% of their final sale price minus \$500. It's the same deal I have with Anatoly. I'm sure he told you I'm as good as my word. Forget what you may have heard about me. Hell, JFK, the fucking president of the United States believed me for chrissakes. How's that for a bona fide?

—I believe you. If you treat me like you treat Anatoly, I'll be one happy camper.

—Look, kid, I know you're a fucked up man, but you're a genius. You paint like a god. I want to represent you. We will make a bundle of dough, just like I have with Anatoly. And I have connections where those amateurs, Elaine Aster and Angelique Brody, are clueless. I can get you in museums. I know collectors who think 100 grand is chump change. What Aster and Brody don't know is that rich people use art to store money. They invest in artists and paintings. I sold a Gringovitch painting to a Swiss banker for five grand in 1963. His estate sold it for \$55,000 five years later. Try making that money on the stock market. Angelique, as wonderful a lady as she was, didn't understand the value of first class paintings. Selling paintings is just

a fucking piece of business, for the rich, it's like buying ATT stock at Merrill-Lynch. Your paintings, Frank, are gold. Fucking gold.

Frank felt like he was being tongue-lashed for being ignorant and trusting Angelique. Maybe Michiko was correct about Elaine and Angelique all this time. Probably Michiko played in the same big leagues as Sarras. After all, she was one of the top piano virtuosos in the world, commanding high fees and making dozens of recordings.

—Do you have some paper so I can wrap these paintings? asked Sarras. I forgot I took all that stuff out of my van.

—Why, yes, Mr. Sarras, said Frank, trying to surface from the depths of his confusion. I can wrap them. I'll do it right now.

—Where's the paper and the tape, said Sarras with impatience. I don't have all night.

When they had wrapped the five paintings and put them in the van, Sarras pulled a big roll of bills secured by a large rubber band from his pocket. He peeled off 25 \$100 bills and gave them to Frank.

—Don't spend them all in one place, kid. Rent yourself a decent place to live, one with a shower. Clean up your act. And if Zambrano or any building inspectors give you grief, call me. I'll settle their hash.

—Yes, Mr. Sarras.

—Just call me Dan, will you, goddamit. And here's my card with my contact information. I'll be in touch with you after the salon in October. And get a fucking phone and give me the number. Christ, kid, you need a fuckin' nursemaid. Get with the program already!

—Yes, sir, said Frank, I'll catch up fast. I'm a smart boy, but AT&T won't put a phone in my place because there's water in the basement at high tide.

—Oh, for chrissakes. Do I have to do everything for you? You'll have a phone by tomorrow night. Trust me. Call me with the number. Now open the goddamn garage door.

To be continued.

