

# The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

## Chapter 46

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**Thursday, September 30, 1976**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City**

Maria Monsanto, the curator of Francesco Martinelli's *Atmospheres* show, stood in the middle of the third-floor gallery. She watched Francesco and a lighting technician adjust the lighting on one of his big paintings. Francesco was driving the staff crazy with his insistence on supervising all aspects of the installation. He was particularly critical of how the paintings were lit. How his show appeared to the viewers was paramount. No detail was too small or insignificant for his attention.

The press previews were Saturday afternoon. Museum benefactors and other dignitaries were invited Sunday evening. Monday and Tuesday were members' previews. Wednesday the exhibit would be open to the general public. Advance ticket sales suggested a full gallery for the entire three-month run of the show.

Maria held a copy of the exhibition catalog, which she wrote and edited. She was checking to see that the rushed first printing had picked up all her editorial changes. She hoped that the worst gaffes in the third galley were corrected. Two of her assistants were checking that the prints of the paintings were properly identified and correctly oriented. Meanwhile, she alone was acting as the mediator between Francesco's nit-picking and the exhausted installation staff.

—Francesco, said Maria, can you come talk to me for a few minutes?

—Give me five more minutes. We almost have the lighting correct on this painting.

—Not a minute more. The photographers will be here in ten minutes.

—They can wait.

Francesco was on a ladder measuring the light falling on the painting with an incident light meter.

—Jerry, said Francesco, addressing the man on a powered lift who was adjusting the light illuminating the upper left corner of the painting, open the left shutter a skosh and aim the light directly at the meter.

—How's that? replied an exasperated Jerry.

—Wait a minute, while I take a few readings, said Francesco. Okay, that is almost perfect. Can you move the light to your left an RCH?

—Shit, said Jerry, I'm at the end of the light's range of motion.

—Well, you went too far. See how the light has spilled over the edge of the painting? If you can get the light right to the edge, we'll have it.

Jerry started to loosen the light with a speed wrench.

—Stop! shouted Francesco. That's perfect. See if you can snug down that light without moving it.

Francesco paced back and forth in front of the painting holding his incident light meter checking that the illumination was even across the entire surface.

—We got it, Jerry. You can come down now and take a break. Only fifteen more paintings to go. Sorry, I know this is taxing, but the lighting has to be correct. No compromises.

—I'm fading fast, Mr. Martinelli, said Jerry. My guys have been at this since eight this morning, and it's now after six. We need a dinner break.

—Okay, okay. But, I want you to look, Jerry. Look at the painting we just finished. You see how it jumps off the wall? Now look at the paintings your guys lit.

Jerry scowled and then broke into a smile.

—All that work and picayune fussing sure makes a difference, said Jerry. Now, I see where you're coming from. I thought you were just busting our balls. I can understand why you were wild when you arrived this afternoon.

—Me? Wild? You must be talking about someone else, said Francesco. Give me five.

The two men did a hand slap.

—You see Jerry, said Francesco, this is the light level I used to paint these pictures. Now you know why they have to be properly lit. You and your guys take a one-hour break. I have to do a photo shoot; then we'll see how many of these we can finish tonight. It should go faster now you know the drill.

—Thanks, Mr. Martinelli.

—Call me Francesco or Frank, Jerry. We're all equals when it comes to doing this kind of work.

—Yes, Mr. Martinelli.

—Ah, the every beautiful and patient Maria Monsanto, said Francesco, walking toward the show's curator who still stood in the center of the gallery. I'm all yours now.

—Francesco, you really hurt some egos, said Maria in a whisper. Those guys are the best guys in the business at hanging and lighting paintings. I know you were trying to be patient, but I may have a labor problem on my hands. Jerry's three helpers are in the Director's office as we speak.

—I think Jerry will calm them down, said Francesco. Don't fret. He saw the difference between their work and my work. Now they can get closer to lighting the paintings correctly, so I don't have to spend so much time on each painting.

—Let's hope so, said Maria without much hope. But, since I have your undivided attention. How far away should we keep the viewers?

—You mean where do we put the velvet ropes?

—Yes. We don't want people touching the paintings. Some of those colors beg to be touched.

—Eighteen inches.

—That seems too close.

—That's the distance Rothko specified. I call that distance "1 Rothko." It's about how close I am to the canvas when I'm painting. Of course, most people will want to stand further away. But you know how people are, they come up close and study brush strokes, colors, technique ... whatever.

—Eighteen inches it is, said Maria writing it down on a clipboard. Francesco, are those the only clothes you have here?

—Why?

—Francesco, the press photographers are going to want to shoot you in front of some of these paintings. That shirt has spaghetti sauce on it and your jeans are filthy.

—I'm working. I should be in a suit and tie?

—Francesco, you are driving me crazy.

—Take it easy, Maria. Just joking. I bought a leather blazer, tie, blue shirt and slacks at Barney's yesterday just for this event.

—Don't jest with me. I'm at my wits end. Just be nice. No teasing or joking.

—Well, I don't joke when I'm working. I needed to bring some levity to the scene.

—Please, Francesco, no joking with me. I'm a nervous wreck.

—Why? This show is going to be the biggest thing the Whitney's put on in decades. The catalog is magnificent and very informative. Your already high reputation will skyrocket.

—If the show gets hung in time, and I'm not too far over budget. At three hours a painting, we will never get all the paintings properly lit by Saturday afternoon.

—Not to worry. Now that Jerry knows what I expect and how to set the lights, it will go much faster. Figure maybe an hour, hour and a half a painting.

—That's more than two full days work. There will have to be overtime. I don't have a budget for overtime.

—Damn it, Maria. They sold out the first month of this show. The second and third months are more than half sold out. They've opened the museum an additional twelve hours a week to accomodate the overflow for my *Atmospheres*. How can you say you don't have money?

—It's not my decision what the budget is; it's the board of directors.

—I'll pay their overtime, if it comes to that. My first solo museum show must be presented properly. I won't tolerate slap-dash, slam-bam, half-assed lighting. Look at it from my side. I'm the artist for chrissakes.

—I'm doing my best, Francesco. Those guys are the finest in the city. They light the Met, MoMA, The Guggenheim, and most of the high-end galleries.

—Well, these guys don't seem like the varsity team. I can tell you this, when we're done lighting my show, I'll have raised their game ten notches.

—Easy, Francesco. Here comes the director with the photographers.

—You handle this. I'll go change clothes. Can I use your office?

—Of course. Just hurry.

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Maria Monsanto walked into the third-floor gallery at 8 AM Friday morning. She saw Francesco on the high-jacker lift adjusting a light. She watched as he lowered the unit and climbed a ladder and measured the light on one of his canvases. It was obvious that he had been working all night. He moved purposefully, but slowly and deliberately.

—Good morning, Francesco. Have you been here all night? Please say no!

—What the fuck do you think? You mother fuckers don't pay me for exhibiting my paintings, and then you hire a bunch of assholes to do the installation. I will not have my paintings besmirched by a bunch of incompetent nincompoops. They've never even seen a light meter, much less know how to use one.

Maria was instantly deflated. She thought everything would work out after last night's photo session. Francesco had been jovial and upbeat. The installation staff was happy to get overtime pay. But now she realized that it was all an illusion. Francesco never went home. He had been here all night by himself, adjusting the lighting on his paintings.

—Francesco, do you want me to order breakfast for you?

—Thank you, Maria. A western omelet, black coffee, fried potatoes, and three pancakes. If you can't find that, get a bagel with cream cheese and black coffee. When are those lame-ass mother-fucking assholes supposed to arrive?

—I'll get you breakfast. They won't arrive until 10 a.m.

—Are you mad at me?

—Maria, I love you madly, to quote Duke Ellington. I'm just a little frustrated.

—You've been yelling at me since I arrived this morning.

—Not at you, at incompetence.

By noon Saturday, all the paintings had been properly lit. But now Francesco was playing with the ambient lighting. It was too bright. Security said that lower light levels would present a security issue.

—Fuck you assholes, said the sleep deprived Francesco.

—Francesco, said Maria, I'm working for you. Security is worried about the safety of your paintings. The insurance company is concerned that someone might make a mark, or cut one of your paintings. Security demands the ambient light level be higher than you want.

—The paintings are brightly lit. What's the fucking problem? No one can buy these paintings, you aren't paying me to exhibit them, and I had to pay to have them trucked over here. For me, this is a fucking vanity show, and you are trying to tell me how to behave? What the fuck is going on here?

—Francesco, don't yell at me. I've worked hard for almost two years to stage this show. I believe in you and your work. Please treat me with respect.

—I'm sorry Maria. I'm not pissed at you. You are my best friend in the art world.

—Francesco, you are exhausted. You need to go to my office and take a nap. You have to meet the press in three hours.

Francesco took Maria in his arms and held her.

—Maria, don't be condescending to me. I'm a fucking artist first, last and always. How can I not love what you've done for me?

To be continued

