

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 48

by Daniel Harris

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* * * Isabella Sanitizzare and Oriana Morosini sat in the Hotel Pierre on Fifth Avenue at 61st Street. They were indulging in the legendary high tea served at this posh Upper East Side establishment. Isabella showed off her perfect body in a knee-length, silver sheath dress that left little to the imagination. Silver and gold bracelets encircled each wrist. A gold cloche hat with a red rose in the hatband perched raffishly on her Titian-red coif. Oriana wore a beautifully tailored Prussian blue Italian suit, with a cream-colored blouse, accented with a handmade floral motif silk scarf, pearls, and a matching beret. Her shoulder length raven hair was combed to one side of her classic Italian face. Her bearing announced high breeding and culture.

Both women knew that most of the eyes in the room were on them. They were speaking in Italian.

—So, do you think Francesco will be at the museum this evening? asked Oriana.

—He's scheduled to be there, said Isabella, taking a small bite of her raspberry scone. But Maria Monsanto, the curator, told me earlier today that he hadn't slept for three days and might be too exhausted to attend this evening.

—But it would be rude of him not to be there, no?

—Well, yes, of course, but you have to understand the Whitney. They don't pay artists when the museum mounts a show. So unfair to the artists. Do you know that Francesco had to redo all the lighting himself? There were many issues with the hanging of the show, and Francesco became an obnoxious micro-manager. Apparently he

alienated nearly all the museum staff; but now that the show is hung, everyone is astounded at the difference his corrections made. I can't wait to see the paintings again.

—You've seen them before? asked Oriana. Where?

—Elaine Aster and I made a visit to Francesco's studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn the day after Angelique Brody's memorial service. He arranged a viewing of the very paintings we will see tonight.

—I am eager to see them. He is really an amazing painter. His style is so original and unique.

—He's one of the best and a tireless worker. Regrettably, he's a serious bipolar case. When depressed, he's not good for art or anything else.

—But his paintings are hardly the work of a depressive.

—According to Elaine Aster, he can't paint when he's depressed. When he's manic and off the tracks, he can and does paint, but he's kept his manic side under control since a bad incident in the summer of 1968. Maria Monsanto told me she was worried Francesco had gone manic during the installation, but he managed to maintain control.

—What bad incident in 1968? I saw him in October of 1968 at a small preview of his first gallery show. He seemed normal then. Shy, but alert.

—I heard that he tore up a saloon and was taken in a straight jacket to a mental hospital.

—That's dreadful! gasped Oriana, putting her hands to her mouth. Has he been hospitalized since then?

—I don't think so. He's had some bad depressions, according to Elaine, but no manic episodes.

Oriana leaned across the table and gestured Isabella to come close.

—Everyone is staring at us. Are we talking too loud?

—I don't think so. All the other women in this room are ancient. We are the center of attention, and maybe they heard us discussing Francesco. You know how old ladies love gossip.

The waiter approached the table.

—Is everything satisfactory, ladies?

—Yes, perfecto! Thank you, replied Isabella in English.

—My I offer dessert compliments of the house? The dessert chef has combined house-made vanilla ice cream on a bed of kiwi fruit topped with raspberries, drizzled with our own chocolate liqueur, and garnished with mint and grated white truffle?

Isabella translated for Oriana.

—Sounds delightful, said Oriana in English.

—And delicious, said Isabella. We accept your generosity. Thank you.

—Yes, ma'am. It's the hotel's pleasure.

Isabella ordered two glasses of champagne to accompany the ice cream. When the dessert arrived, it exceeded all expectations. As the waiter carried the treat to his customers, he showed the artfully arranged dessert to several tables of patrons who gave the two women nodding smiles of appreciation.

—Look, the dessert has the colors of the Italian flag, said Isabella.

—Yes, the staff heard you speaking Italian, said the waiter. We asked the chef to make a treat for you.

—Grazie mille, said Oriana.

—That is so kind of you, said Isabella, putting her hand on the waiters forearm. Our congratulations to the chef and staff.

—Our pleasure to serve you, said the waiter. Your beauty has brightened our room, it is only right we return the favor.

—Flattery will get you everywhere, young man, said Isabella.

—How do they think these things up? asked Oriana. The flavors are so perfect together and a delight to the eyes.

—A toast to Francesco Martinelli, said Isabella, raising her flute.

—Francesco Martinelli, Salute!

The women enjoyed their desserts slowly and thoughtfully, savoring the variety of flavors.

—Do you think Francesco is a good catch? asked Oriana.

—Were you thinking of pursuing him?

—There was electricity between us the one time we met, said Oriana, and he is handsome and very masculine.

—He's not my type, and he's a mental case, answered Isabella. Not good. His girlfriend threw him out last January. She couldn't tolerate his mood swings.

—Who was this girlfriend, another painter?

—No, the piano virtuoso, Michiko.

—The Michiko? said Oriana wide-eyed. Who told you this?

—Angelique Brody. She was Francesco's lawyer, adviser, and she became his dealer after Elaine Aster refused to show his color modulation paintings. Brody actually sold one of those color modulation paintings for \$65,000 before she died.

—The numbers are meaningless to me, said Oriana. I haven't a clue how much that would be in lire. 65,000 lire might buy you half a kilo of good *Parmigiano-Reggiano*.

—I think it would be more than 55 million lire, said Isabella, who had a quick head for numbers.

—Wow! That is a lot of money.

—That sale puts Francesco among the top-earning American artists.

—But Angelique died in that plane crash; who is his dealer now?

—Dan Sarras, he's Anatoly Gringovitch's dealer, said Isabella, checking her watch.

—What is your connection to Francesco, Isabella?

—I manage Elaine Aster's Paris gallery, Aster Place. Francesco Martinelli was our main artist. Currently, we have no Martinelli paintings to sell because he's only painting large canvases. We don't have wall space for large canvases like you will see this evening. But, Elaine Aster, who used to be Francesco's dealer, still has options on smaller paintings, drawings, and etchings.

—But why wouldn't you want to sell his new works?

—Elaine says that she, and I'm speaking out of school here, doesn't have the client base for art that size and price.

—As you know, I work at Galleria Fonte Nuova in Venice, which has the space and the clients. Can you help me arrange to display and sell some Martinelli paintings?

—We should talk after you've seen the exhibit, said Isabella. You will see that Francesco Martinelli's *Atmospheres* are huge paintings. Billboard size. No one can sell them. And worse, he wants them kept as an ensemble display. The good news is, *entre nous*, *Atmospheres* may travel to the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

—What about the color modulation paintings?

—They might be the place to start. You'll have to deal with Francesco's dealer, Dan Sarras. He has an eye for beautiful women, and uses them in his business dealings, but he's no Romeo. His estranged wife, Claudia Monschaud, is stunning and a good friend. She's a Pan Am stewardess.

—Is he difficult to approach?

—He can be a crude and difficult man. At the same time, Dan Sarras can be a charming and witty gentleman. He has connections all over the world. Rumor has it that he worked as a spy for both the Russians and the Americans. He was arrested for counterfeiting \$100 bills for the KGB. President Kennedy pardoned him. That's how high his connections go.

—And he's Francesco's new dealer?

—Yes. I don't know if Sarras will attend tonight, but if he's there, I'll introduce you.

—Don't you think we should go now? asked Oriana.

—Yes, I'll take care of the bill, said Isabella, then we'll freshen up in the ladies room.

* * *

Frank's friend Albert had offered to meet Frank at Frank's Red Hook, Brooklyn, building late Sunday afternoon. Albert would make sure that Frank, Francesco's real name and the one used by his pre-celeb friends, was awake, then drive him to the Whitney Museum for the special preview for friends, dealers, and elite museum donors.

Albert rapped "shave and a haircut, two bits" on the front door, and then used the key Frank gave him to enter the building. He found Frank at work on a large canvas.

—Jesus, is it five all ready?

—Yep. Five on the dot, said Albert, consulting his watch. Did you sleep at all?

—Like a baby until noon. I've been working since then.

—You look like you haven't slept, said Albert, examining Frank's face.

—Almost twelve hours. I was out.

—You're not going to this shindig dressed like that are you?

—Hell, no. There's going to be some hot women at this gathering tonight. Gotta look sharp.

Just then they could hear someone trying to break into Albert's van. Frank ran to his gun rack, grabbed a sawed-off shotgun, shells and loaded the gun while kicking open the street door. He fired two shots in the air and reloaded. The two punks took off running. Francesco fired in their general direction. He could hear the pellets hitting the street. A few may have hit the punks in the legs.

—You fuckers come around here again I won't fire the first two in the air, yelled Francesco at the figures standing a block away. You sons-a-bitches fuck with me one more time, Zambrano will take care of you.

One of the punks walked into the middle of the street and wildly fired a pistol at Francesco and Albert. They ducked behind Albert's van. Most of the bullets hit Albert's truck. Two ricocheted off the metal garage door. Francesco and Albert retreated into the building. Francesco took his deer rifle from a gun rack.

—Frank, don't go there, said Albert, grabbing Frank's arm. If you shoot at them now, it'll be attempted murder or, worse, premeditated murder.

Frank stopped and thought about what he was about to do.

—You're right, Albert. Thanks for keeping me out of trouble on my biggest day.

—Get dressed. I'll guard the fort, said Albert, loading the sawed-off shotgun.

—Here, take a slug of this, said Frank, handing Albert a bottle of Jack Daniels.

—That's gonna go down well. There's a lot of adrenaline flowing.

—Me, too, said Frank, chugging a big gulp of the whiskey.
—You better get cleaned up. We're probably going to be late.
—Right. Give me ten minutes to shower, shave, and dress. Careful if you fire that sawed-off shotgun. It has a huge kick. Don't get stinko on me with that whiskey. You're driving.

When Frank and Albert left for the Whitney, they kept a sharp eye out for the two hoods or other gang members. Thankfully they didn't see any punks on the street.

—Sorry about your truck, said Frank.

—Hey, this van's seen worse. I've rolled it over twice.

—You know, Albert, said Frank, there will be a slew of gallery owners and art dealers there tonight. I hope you have some photos of your work. It's about time you got a break. I'll introduce you to the ones I know.

—Thanks. I'm getting weary of part-time jobs and selling my work for peanuts.

—Are you still teaching at Pratt in Brooklyn?

—Yeah, an architectural drawing class two days a week for a handful of nickels.

—That blows.

—I don't think I can get much thinner. I feast on a can of soup a day and Chinese takeout twice a week, he said with an ironical smirk.

—Jesus, why didn't you tell me, I could have loaned you some cash.

—Frank, you don't live in the 'hood anymore. You're out in the wilds of Brooklyn.

—Well, here, said Frank, slipping three 100's from his wallet and stuffing them in Albert's shirt pocket.

—Frank, you don't have to do that.

—Fuck I don't. I almost got you killed this afternoon. Consider us even.

—Now I feel bad about teasing you all those years about being Francesco Martinelli.

—Albert, get a life. Francesco Martinelli made that money. Your friend, Frank Martin, strategically relocated it to your pocket.
To be continued.

