

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 49

by Daniel Harris

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The first person Albert and Frank encountered when they entered the elevator to the third-floor gallery at the Whitney was Maria Monsanto.

—Francesco, you made it, said Maria offering a cheek to Francesco. And you look so handsome.

—Thank you, Maria, said Francesco, kissing Maria's cheek wondering what caused the big change in her attitude. Maria, this is my good friend Albert Pachis. Albert, Maria Monsanto is the curator of my show. She's a genius.

—Pleased to meet you, said Maria extending her hand. Are you an artist?

—A starving artists, said Albert, shaking her hand, even though my last name means "fat" in Greek.

—Well, you are thin. There is an excellent buffet tonight, so you can fatten up.

—I'm more excited to see Frank's paintings properly hung and lit. I've only seen them in his Red Hook studio.

—I don't know if Francesco told you, but he essentially did the lighting himself. He drove us nuts, but the final result is mind blowing.

Francesco looked askance at Maria. She was a changed person compared to the woman he'd been dealing with for the past six months.

—Maria, what's come over you? asked Francesco, you seem so friendly tonight.

—I must confess I've changed my opinion of you. After everyone left the press conference last night, I spent an hour alone with your paintings. I realized I didn't really appreciate your genius. I felt bad for not trusting your judgment and talent. I resolved to be an enthusiastic supporter.

—But, Maria, I never doubted you, said Francesco, putting his arm around her shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze.

When Albert walked into the gallery, he felt like he was entering a strange, wondrous world. His response to the monumental canvases was not unique. There were two hundred special guests scattered among the three third floor galleries. They all were engaged with the paintings in a near religious reverence. Francesco had correctly titled the paintings *Atmospheres*; they did create a rarefied atmosphere. The power of the paintings individually and collectively was palpable. Occasionally a patron would make a comment in hushed tones to a companion, but reverential silence was the norm. It was as if a Kirlian aura emanated from paintings, a veritable force field; there was a quiddity that became even more apparent the longer one stayed immersed in the presence of these monolithic canvases.

Francesco entered the gallery, and he immediately went to work. Using his light meter, he validated his suspicions: the ambient light level was too high. He talked the on-duty security guard out of the key to the light cabinet. He lowered the ambient light to the marks he had put on the rheostats. When he re-entered the gallery, he confirmed that now the gallery walls were hidden in the dark, and the paintings appeared as three-dimensional places of light and color. The canvases ceased to be large painted rectangles on a wall, but now floated in the same space as the viewers. This change was not lost on the attendees, whose collective gasp Francesco could hear from the light closet the instant he made the change.

Now Francesco visually checked each painting for uniform lighting. As much as people wanted to congratulate him, they could see that he was intent on his task.

When he had inspected all the canvases, he retreated to the bar, which stood outside the galleries near the elevators, adjacent a fourth gallery, which was set up as the buffet room.

—Mr. Martinelli, said a tall, slender man with a sharp nose and thin lips. His English was heavily French-accented.

—Yes, sir, replied Francesco.

—My name is Honoré Boncourt, curator of contemporary painting at the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, he said, extending his hand.

—Hello, said Francesco, shaking the man's hand. Honoré looked like a typical upper-class Frenchman. He was graceful with perfect manners

—I don't know if you know, but we have been in negotiations with Dan Sarras and Isabella Sanitizzare about the possibility of mounting this show at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in November 1978.

—Dan Sarras mentioned it to me yesterday, but I was too busy to discuss it in any detail. A show at the Centre Pompidou would be a coup for both of us, said Francesco, being as gracious as he remembered Angelique could be in negotiations.

—This is a groundbreaking and revolutionary show, Mr. Martinelli. Absolutely first-rate.

—Thank you, said Francesco with a smile. You can call me Francesco or Frank. I answer to either.

—Francesco, do you know if Dan Sarras is here?

—I didn't see him when I went through the galleries, but I did see Isabella. How long are you in New York?

—My assistant and I will be here through Thursday. We hope to firm up the preliminaries for mounting this show at the Centre Pompidou.

—I'm going to be busy tonight working the crowd, said Francesco, but perhaps Monday or Tuesday we can meet for lunch.

—Do you think we can visit your studio?

—My studio is a former ship propeller fabrication shop in a very rough section of Brooklyn. I also live there. It's a great studio, but a terrible place to live. I'd be more than pleased to host a visit. I can show you some of the canvases I call color modulation paintings.

—I saw Crepuscular Sunrise at the auction previews earlier this year. What an exciting work. I wish we had bid on it, but we were at the auction advising one of our benefactors who wanted to purchase a Lucian Freud painting.

—I don't feel bad taking a back seat to Lucian Freud. He's one of my favorite active painters.

—I wouldn't say back seat, perhaps front passenger seat, said Boncourt with an easy smile.

People were beginning to leave the galleries and gather around the bar and buffet tables. The same string quartet that played for his first show at Elaine Aster's gallery was changing their selections from avant-garde expressionist music to classical repertoire suitable for dining.

—Excuse me, Monsieur Boncourt, but I must greet my fans. Let's plan on Tuesday afternoon at my studio. It would be best if Dan Sarras and Isabella Sanitizzare were in attendance so we can discuss business.

—Absolutely.

—Here's my card, said Francesco, handing Boncourt his card. Call me tomorrow morning. My address is on the card. It is a very dangerous neighborhood, so take a cab or car service directly to my door.

—How early? asked Boncourt.

—I grew up on a farm, so I'm up and working by six.

—I won't be calling that early. I'll call you at ten. Thank you for this exciting show. I look forward to mounting it in Paris.

—Me too, said Francesco, shaking Boncourt's hand and turning to meet a line of people waiting to speak with him.

—Francesco Martinelli, said Garth Whipple.

—Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Whipple, said Francesco, shaking their hands.

—Bravo. Bravissimo, said the Whipples in unison.
—Thank you, thank you, replied Francesco.
—Is Michiko here? asked Mrs. Whipple.
—I didn't see her, though we sent her an invitation. You know we are not an item any longer.
—Oh, that's sad, said Mrs. Whipple. You were such a cute couple.
—Too much talent to peacefully coexist under one roof, said Garth Whipple.
—Something like that, said Francesco.

By the time Francesco had received the congratulations from the assembled crowd, his throat was parched, his stomach was growling, and his hand was tired from shaking hands. He wondered how politicians survived all the handshaking they performed day in and day out during a campaign. It also caused him to perspire profusely. Even though he had talked himself into "performance mode," it was difficult to be touched by so many strangers.

He saw Albert and Maria talking in the first gallery. They looked like they were hitting it off. Maria was laughing, and Albert was doing his pantomimes of Giacometti sculptures.

Isabella Sanitizzare was in earnest conversation with Honoré Boncourt, and an officious looking woman, who Francesco guessed was Boncourt's assistant. Two well-dressed men were flirting with Oriana Morosini. Francesco decided it was time to reintroduce himself to Oriana, who had been surreptitiously watching him ever since he was talking with the Whipples.

—The beautiful Oriana Morosini, said Francesco, ignoring the two men and holding Oriana at arm's length. Oriana offered her cheeks for air kisses. Francesco gave her two air kisses. Francesco's stomach uttered a loud series of borborygmi.

—You are starvéd, said Oriana, laughing as much at her English as the gurgling of Francesco's gut.

—I haven't eaten today.

—Come, Francesco, we plate you food. Scusari, said Oriana to the two men who stepped aside to let her pass. Oriana took Francesco's

arm and walked him to the buffet table. The two men marveled at her perfection.

—I guess you have to be a rock star artist to get a broad like that, said one of the men.

—You got that right.

At the buffet, servers filled their plates. They sat in the middle of the head table in a space reserved for Francesco and "friend." A waiter brought them wine.

—I can't believe it is eight years since I last saw you. You've only gotten more beautiful, said Francesco, surprised at his forthrightness.

—Francesco, *più lento. Rallentare. Il tuo inglese è troppo veloce per questa ragazza italiana.*

— *Che cosa?* said Francesco, shrugging his shoulders and holding his outstretched palms up. He smiled.

— *Rallentare*, slow, said Oriana, giving Francesco a bright smile. You speak too fast English for this Italian girl.

—You are so, so beautiful, said Francesco, speaking slowly.

—Si, your paintings are beautiful.

—No, no, you, Oriana, are beautiful.

— *Attimo. Ho dizionario.*

—Ah, yes. A dictionary.

When Elaine Aster approached Francesco and Oriana, they were huddled head to head over a book.

—Congratulations, Francesco. As usual you were correct about the paintings, but I was correct about the marketing.

—Elaine, I believe you know Oriana Morosini, said Francesco, standing and gesturing to Oriana.

—Yes, of course. I believe I introduced you two back in 1968. Let me give you a congratulatory kiss, said Elaine offering her lips.

—Time flies, and tastes change, said Francesco, avoiding her lips and giving her an air kiss.

Elaine scowled.

—Is there any truth to the rumor that this show is going to the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Pompidou Center in 1978?

—That would be news to me, said Francesco, but I wouldn't say no, unless I had to foot the bill like I did here.

—Honoré Boncourt seems to think it is, and he's their curator for contemporary painting.

—He has to go through Dan Sarras, as you know. Do you mind if I sit? I haven't eaten all day.

—No, not at all. I'll leave you two alone. You should be allowed to have a date once every eight years.

Francesco wondered what prompted Elaine to come and announce that piece of confidential news. But as Angelique told him many times, the art world is a nest of lies, rumors, speculations, gossip and fabulous fantasies.

—You no like Elaine? asked Oriana.

—No, she is a thief.

—*Un ladro*?

—Dictionary. Wait a minute. We were discovering how old you are.

—*Tranta-tre*.

—33?

—Si.

—Noooo. Can't be.

—You. How many years?

—*Tranta-cinque*, said Francesco, writing the number with his finger on the tablecloth.

—Perfecto!

A jazz-rock fusion group began to play for dancing. Their initial song selections were spot on and the dance floor filled with other couples moving into the galleries.

—You dance me? asked Oriana.

—You better believe it, replied Francesco, taking her hand and leading her to the first gallery where they danced among his paintings for the rest of the evening. When they band stopped at eleven, Francesco and Oriana returned to the head table and enjoyed a glass of champagne.

Albert and Maria approached the table.

—Sit, said Francesco.

—We were going to leave, said Albert. I'm driving Maria home to New Rochelle. Do you want to wait here for me, or take a cab home?

Francesco looked at Oriana, then Albert.

—Well, I don't want to hold you up. I'll take a cab or bum a ride from someone from Brooklyn.

—You're sure? said Albert. You know what happened earlier today.

—You two go on your way. I'll be fine.

When Albert and Maria stopped in her office to retrieve her coat, she gave Albert a worried look.

—Albert, what happened earlier today?

—Two punks tried to steal my van in front of Frank's studio. When we chased them off, they fired a pistol at us.

—That's horrible. I don't think Francesco should go back to his studio tonight.

—I doubt he's going there tonight. Did you see how smitten with Francesco Oriana was? I suspect they'll go to Oriana's room at the Waldorf.

To be continued.

