The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 50

by Daniel Harris

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Oriana, much as she wanted to, did not sleep with Francesco, propriety ruled. They had engaged in kissing and hugging on the sofa in her Waldorf suite but no sexual activity.

The cab dropped Francesco at his Red Hook studio at two a.m. and sped away with squealing tires. The first thing Frank noticed was the smoldering ashes and half-burned paintings in front of the garage door of his studio. The smashed front door was ajar. When Frank entered, he saw that the studio was torn asunder. Pillaged. The floor was littered with slashed and burned paintings, paint was smeared on the walls and poured on the floor. His small refrigerator had been ripped out of his kitchen and thrown down on the studio floor. Broken beer bottles and an empty Jack Daniels bottle littered the floor of the studio.

Amid the ruins lay his cat Bounder, his skull crushed.

Frank gathered up the inert body of Bounder, sat on his Adirondack chair and wept; he bawled, swore, screamed and then sat quietly, tears rolling down his face. Bounder, his best friend, was dead, the last two years of his work was destroyed. He laid Bounder on the chair and went to his gun cabinet. His guns were gone along with all the ammunition.

A day that had dawned so hopeful, a day of great triumph and now, instantly, all hope was abandon. He had worked on a new large painting that morning, defended his property and Albert's van, received the highest accolades from major critics and collectors of

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contemporary art; met and began a relationship with a beautiful woman only to arrive home to this: absolute Armageddon.

His mind flip-flopped between depression and mania. Should he retreat? Should he buy guns and go after the sick thugs who had inflicted this horror on him and his art, or retreat to Wisconsin and take over his family's apple orchards. How much defeat did a man have to suffer? Angelique was dead. Michiko had thrown him out. Elaine was a thief. Two years worth of his art was destroyed.

Sitting in his savaged studio, he suddenly realized that depression was not settling on his head. Rage, and a great sadness at the waste wrought by uncultured, ignorant low-lifes who probably didn't have a clue about what or whom they took their misguided revenge. How could a so-called advanced society harbor such people?

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Albert worried about Frank as he drove south on I-95 from Maria Monsanto's New Rochelle home. He thought he better check on Frank. If Frank went to his loft, he might be vulnerable to a revenge attack from the punks they had confronted. Albert hoped Frank had stayed with Oriana, but he had a gut feeling that Frank was in Red Hook and in distress.

When he pulled up to Frank's building, he saw the carnage. The front door was open, and the lights were on in the studio.

—Frank, it's Albert. Where are you?

—Albert, I'm over here, down the street.

Albert saw Frank carrying a black plastic bag.

—What the fuck happened?

—Those asshole motherfuckers destroyed my studio and killed Bounder. Bounder is in this sack with some bricks. I'm going to bury him in the harbor.

—Jesus, this is a fucking tragedy, said Albert.

—They stole my guns and wrecked my studio. Those motherfuckers slashed and burned my paintings.

—Christ, said Albert, I don't know what to say or do.

—I have to kill them. They have destroyed me.

—But think of your great paintings at the Whitney. You are in the history books.

—Yes, but my color-modulation paintings are destroyed. Only six survive. The one Angelique sold and five that Sarras has to sell in Paris. The other twenty-four are gone, dead, destroyed.

—Motherfucker. Goddamn motherfuckers, said Albert, kicking a rock down the street. This is more tragic than a Shakespeare play.

—Albert, can I ask you a favor?

—Sure, anything.

—Can you consign Bounder to the deep? I just can't do it.

—Of course. What are friends for?

Spinning like an Olympic hammer thrower, Albert threw the sack as far out as Buttermilk Channel. They could see and hear the plunk the sack made when it hit the water. The two men stood staring at the ever-widening circle of the sack's plunk-wave on the calm harbor waters. When the wave reached the bulwark where they stood, Albert recited the 23rd Psalm.

—You should come to my loft, said Albert. It's not safe at your place.

—I need to get a gun from Gringovitch. I want to kill those fuckers.

—I can take you to Gringovitch's home, but you shouldn't come back here. You can't hold off a dozen armed hopped-up thugs. For Christ sakes, Frank, we should call the cops.

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Oriana was distraught. Francesco never called her on Monday. Her calls to his studio went unanswered. By late Monday afternoon, she was beside herself with worry and doubt. Francesco told her he would take her to lunch Monday after he checked the lighting at his show. Maybe Francesco really is a crazy wild man, thought Oriana. Maybe he was upset because she didn't have sex with him. Maybe he'd gone back to Michiko. A hundred thoughts raced through her head. Later Monday afternoon she walked to the Whitney Museum. She hoped Francesco would be there, checking the presentation of

his show and talking to patrons. When she entered the museum, she saw Maria Monsanto.

—Oriana, have you heard what happened to Francesco? asked Maria, ushering Oriana into her office.

—Yes, I not hear from Francesco today.

—Oriana, you don't know what happened?

—Happened?

—People broke into Francesco's studio and destroyed all his paintings. They killed his favorite cat.

Oriana screamed and then broke into shoulder-wracking sobs. Maria was startled at the emotional outburst. It shook Maria to her bones to witness such vocal grief. Maria thought she was at the opera. Maria led Oriana to a chair and made her sit. She took a box of tissues from her desk.

—Is he dead? Oriana asked, trying to regain her composure.

—No. He is alive. He is at the home of Anatoly Gringovitch in Brooklyn. The police detectives and crime scene technicians were with him at his studio until an hour ago. Albert telephoned me with all the details.

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Tuesday morning Isabella translated the article in the *New York Daily News* for Oriana. There was a picture on the cover of the *Daily News* showing the destruction in Francesco's studio. The *Daily News* headline read: *Thugs Vandalize A Master's Art.*

—The poor man. I'm so worried about him, said Oriana.

—We all are, said Isabella. We know how fragile he is.

—But he is so strong, physically strong.

—Yes, but his mind is not, Oriana. You have to know that. If you bond with him, you will have a great burden. It's better for you to go back to Venice and reconnect with your culture.

—But I love Francesco. My ex-husband was a brute. He beat me, me a beautiful, cultured highborn woman. I never denied my husband sex. I have a college education and kept our home immaculate. My ex-husband was a pretty-boy low-life gangster. His brutalities to me hastened my mother's death and made my father

sick. Francesco is so kind and gentle. He might be crazy, but all he needs is love and care. I can give him that. Now he is licking his wounds in Brooklyn. I don't know if he will ever want me again. I am bereft.

—I will call Gringovitch, said Isabella. If Francesco can see you, we will go to Brooklyn.

—I am afraid of this Brooklyn.

—Yes, I understand, but we will be safe.

Isabella called Gringovitch's home and spoke with Francesca, Gringovitch's wife. She told Isabella to come after two in the afternoon.

—Oriana, Madame Gringovitch says that you would be Francesco's best medicine.

—When can we see him?

—We will go after lunch. He is sleeping now.

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—This is serious shit, said Sarras. He and Zambrano were standing in front of Francesco's Red Hook studio Tuesday evening. Those punks are fucking with major league money. They destroyed over three million in paintings.

—We know who they are, said Zambrano.

—Well, do my people take them out, or yours?

—My people will take care of it, said Zambrano. Don't get your hands dirty.

—Don't bullshit me, with your dago bravado. I want proof positive that you'll fix this problem.

—Easy, Sarras. We can do as clean a job as your Ruskie toughs.

—Probably not as painful.

—I promise you, I won't fail you. I like that kid Francesco, even if he's not a *pisano*.

—Remember, Zambrano, we go back a long way. Don't fuck with me.

—You got my word.

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—Francesco, are you awake?

—Yes, Oriana.

—Please hold me.

—Of course.

Francesco turned on his side and pulled Oriana to him. Her skin was dry, warm and smooth. Francesco had never encountered skin so smooth and perfect. He caressed her cheeks with the back of his hand. He was lying alongside the body of a real woman. Not a skinny woman like Michiko, but a woman with beautiful full breasts and hips, strong lean thighs that tapered to trim ankles and smallish feet. When he first saw her legs, he knew she would never be a fat Italian mama. The bones were not there to support the weight.

—*Ti amo* Oriana, said Francesco, testing his newfound Italian.

—*Ti amo*.

Oriana began to weep. She didn't know why she was weeping. Love, frustration, sorrow at what happened to Francesco, the uncertain future. She didn't know or even want to know. She knew she loved this hard luck man who made glorious pictures. She wanted to devote her life to him and his art. To her he was kind, thoughtful, and gentle.

—When is your plane? asked Francesco.

—Tonight at six.

—What time is it?

—Two.

—You should get ready. I will go to the airport with you.

—Will you come to Venice?

—Of course. I have no home in America.

—Of course, you do.

—No, America has killed me.

—But your glorious show at the Whitney.

—Yes, but then?

—Paris?

—Yes, maybe. Nothing is finalized.

—I will help you. You will come to Venice. You will paint great pictures again. It is the tradition of Venice.

—Hundreds of years ago.

—No, Francesco, you will start a new Venetian Renaissance. You will continue the tradition of Titian, Tintoretto, and the great masters.

—How old do you think I am? asked Francesco, laughing.

—Finally you laugh, said Oriana, kissing Francesco on the forehead.

—I want to ravish you again, said Francesco.

—*Lento*. Go slow. We must remember this time, Francesco.

To be continued