

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 51

by Daniel Harris

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The gate attendant pointed at her wristwatch and then spoke into a microphone.

—Will Alitalia passenger Oriana Morosini please come to gate 27B. Your flight to Rome is in final boarding.

—You have to go, said Frank, or they will leave without you. Oriana clung to him hoping to squeeze more of him into her.

Reluctantly she pulled herself away and walked down the skyway, turning and waving every few steps. She blew Francesco a last kiss and turned to enter the plane.

Francesco tried to fix Oriana's face in his mind as he blindly walked to the taxi queue.

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When Frank returned to his Red Hook studio that evening, there were three goombas leaning against the building.

—What the fuck? said Frank.

—Zambrano sent us. Get in the car.

Frank sat in the back seat between two of the goombas. He could smell gunpowder and garlic.

—Where are we going? asked Frank.

No one answered. The car drove from Red Hook through Carroll Gardens to Gowanus Crushed Stone and Concrete situated on the Gowanus Canal, the most polluted waterway in Brooklyn, if not all of North America. A barbed wire topped the fifteen-foot wood fence surrounded the property. DCS&C was a large yard with twenty-foot-tall cones of crushed stone. Front loaders and dump trucks lined one

side of the yard. A tower hopper and mill to grind limestone for concrete stood near the entrance to the yard. There was another car and a van in the yard when the car carrying Frank pulled in. Tied to the canal bulwark was a barge filled with large granite blocks. Two men stood in the rapidly fading twilight looking into the deeply laden barge. A grab bucket crane was idling near the barge.

The six young men were already dead when Frank arrived. Two of the goombas walked Frank over to identify the men. The men had been savagely bludgeoned and shot.

—I've seen all these punks in the neighborhood, said Frank gagging at the bloody sight. This one shot at me on Sunday afternoon.

He thought about two years worth of hard work and lost labor, about Bounder dead at the bottom of Buttermilk Channel. All this needless tragedy caused by the stupidity of these dead-end junky punks. The irony was that Zambrano's crime family supplied the drugs.

The barge held 1,500 tons of riprap size granite blocks. Each block was a cubic foot or larger in size and weighed 200+ pounds. It would take the crane a day to unload the barge, but tonight it required only an hour to bury the bodies. The first bucket of riprap, a full ton of stones thudded on the bodies from twenty feet in the air. Bucket-by-bucket, the bodies of the six punks disappeared. Their crushed gelatinous bodies would not be discovered until the twenty-first century when the rocks were used to shore up the pit that was the basement of the destroyed World Trade Center. No one thought it unusual for small bone and cloth fragments to be found in that industrial yard. Rain and melting snow washed the fragments into the Gowanus Canal.

Francesco, totally shaken by the experience, shuffled to the elevated Smith Street and Ninth Avenue subway stop. He boarded a Manhattan-bound F train. As the train descended from the Gowanus Canal bridge, Frank saw the crane drop another bucket onto the growing pile. He rode the nearly empty train staring straight ahead. He exited at Broadway-Lafayette and walked to the Maple Tavern.

—Christ, you look like you've seen a ghost, said the Big Jack, the bartender.

—It's been a tough week, Jack, said Frank.

—Yeah, we saw the stories in the *News* and the *Times*. I wonder if they will ever catch those punks?

—Probably not, even though the cops have a good idea who the perps are. If they do bring them in, they will plead to some lesser crime and get off with a slap on the wrist. There's no justice anymore.

—That's for shit-sure. What can I get you?

—Shot of Jack and a bottle of Bass.

—You got it.

When Big Jack called Albert, he told him that Frank was in a bad way and to come and take him away. Albert rushed the four blocks to the Maple Tavern.

Frank was sitting at a corner table by himself with his head pillowed on his arms. Albert couldn't tell if Frank was passed out, drunk or crying. He put his hand on Frank's shoulder.

—Frank, are you okay?

Frank did not respond. Albert walked to the bar, which was mostly empty, it being after dinner and before the night crowd.

—Is Frank drunk or what? asked Albert.

—He only had one shot and two beers, said Big Jack. I doubt he's drunk, but he's very depressed about something.

—Well, you know what happened to him. I don't know how he's holding up as well as he is. I'll see if I can get him to come to my place.

—Frank, this is Albert. Come. Let's go to my loft. We can talk.

—Leave me alone.

—No, Frank. You can't stay here. Let's go.

Slowly Frank sat up and looked at Albert. Albert could see that Frank had been crying. Frank took a napkin and blew his nose. Albert took a napkin from an adjacent table and gave it to Frank, who wiped his eyes.

—Come on, Frank, let's blow this place. Walking will be good for you.

When the two arrived at Albert's building, there was a black chauffeur-driven Cadillac parked in front. As Albert unlocked the front door, a short, wiry man with silver hair dressed in a black suit exited the car. The man wore thick glasses and was carrying a small portfolio.

—Is one of you Albert Pachis? asked the man.

—I am, said Albert. This is my friend Frank Martin.

—My name is Agoston Kardos. I represent Mahler Galleries. I would like to talk to Albert Pachis. Maria Monsanto showed me your slides. May I see some of your work?

Albert didn't know what to say. Maybe this was his big break, yet he felt obligated to take care of his distressed friend.

—Hell yes, said Frank, realizing Albert's dilemma. You are about to enter the amazing world of Albert Pachis.

Albert didn't know what to say. He was confused by his possible turn of fortune and Frank's sudden about face.

—My loft is on the third floor, said Albert. We'll have to walk up.

—That is not a problem for me, said Kardos.

The three men climbed in silence to Albert's floor. Albert had five locks on his door. It took him some time before he could usher Frank and Kardos into his loft.

Albert's loft was immaculate and perfectly organized. Washed coffee cups were drying on a rack next to the sink. The floor had been recently whitewashed. Frank thought he recognized a woman's scarf neatly folded on a chest of drawers as belonging to Maria Monsanto.

—What are you interested in seeing, asked Albert.

—Everything, but let's start with your five best paintings.

Frank helped Albert arrange five paintings on easels. Even though Albert's loft had beautiful north light and Albert kept the windows spotless, Frank had helped him install daylight studio lighting for working at night or on cloudy days. Albert flipped the lights on.

Kardos made a small jump when the lights came on. The paintings were unlike anything he had ever seen. They were all about six feet long and two feet high. They were city street scenes, but views of the same setting as seen simultaneously from multiple vantage points.

—These are marvelous works, said Kardos. They are almost sculptural.

—As you can see, said Albert, warming to the situation, the picture is painted on a wood panel made up of half-inch wood squares of several different thicknesses. The painting and the surface are fully planned before I begin painting. The uneven ground and the multiple perspectives make for a very active surface. You'll notice if you walk around the painting, the changing perspective gives the illusion not only of different perspectives, but also completely different locales. The painting is a trope of genre street scene paintings. In this painting, it's like seeing the same scene from five different locations simultaneously. Some people liken my technique to M.C. Escher. There is a lot of math and geometry involved.

—I saw the slide of this painting, but that detail was not clear, said Kardos. This painting is especially interesting to me. How long does it take you to make a painting like this?

—I worked on this for six months, but I was working on other things at the same time, so from beginning to end, probably a thousand hours. That doesn't include several hundred hours of prep drawings, calculations, and tests. The nature of my work requires that I calculate and draw everything prior to actual painting.

—Interesting, said Kardos, walking around the five easels and inspecting each painting. Beautiful finishing job, Mr. Pachis, and perfectly framed.

—One of the other things I do is create models of fantasy cities. Would you like to see one?

—Absolutely.

—Albert is an incredibly gifted artist, said Frank.

—I'm sorry, what was your name again? asked Kardos.

—Frank Martin, but you might know me as Francesco Martinelli.

—I thought you looked familiar. What a triumph you're having at the Whitney.

—Yes, I am pleased. Maria Monsanto is a brilliant curator. I was fortunate to work with her.

—But didn't your studio burn down recently?

—Something like that, said Frank.

Frank helped Albert move one of the model cities from his storage area to the workspace. The model, which was ten feet square and over six feet high, was built on a wheeled table that Albert had constructed. The city itself was suspended over a bucolic scene. When the model was in place, Albert hooked up a water hose to a connection under the cart. Slowly the rivers, ponds and lakes filled and fountains splashed water. Once the reservoir was filled, a small electric pump kept the water in motion.

Kardos didn't know what to say. The model took one's breath away with its intricately carved and painted buildings, the variety of realistic people, plants, and animals.

—This is my version of Xanadu, said Albert. You know the poem by Coleridge, *Kublai Khan. In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, A stately pleasure-dome decree* and so on.

—Here's what gets me every time, said Frank. Show him the damsel and her dulcimer.

Albert took a toothpick and plucked the string on a working half-inch long dulcimer.

Between the paintings and the model city, Kardos was speechless.

—I should be getting back to Brooklyn, Albert. I promised Francesca Gringovitch I would watch the boys. Besides, you will want to speak confidentially.

—You don't have to go, said Albert. I know you've had a rough week.

—I'll be fine. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Kardos.

—The pleasure was mine, said Kardos, offering his hand.

Albert is a one-of-a-kind artist, said Frank, shaking Kardos's hand. Your gallery should take him on.

—Frank, I'll call you later. Where will you be.
—I'll be at Gringovitch's house. Do you have his number?
—Yes, he gave me his card.
To be continued

