

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 52

by Daniel Harris

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—Maria, said Isabella, you have to call Francesco. Oriana is out of her mind. She hasn't heard from Francesco in a week.

—I don't know where Francesco is. I called his Red Hook studio, no answer. I called Gringovitch's home, but he wasn't there. Albert said he called Francesco Thursday night, but Francesco was not at his loft or Gringovitch's home.

—Doesn't anyone know where he is? asked Isabella, who was calling from Paris.

—Well, I don't, and he hasn't been to the Whitney to check on his show.

—Christ, I hope he hasn't killed himself.

—Why on earth would you say that? That's a horrible thing to say.

—Elaine says she upset him so much he became suicidal. And now that all the paintings in his loft are destroyed, who knows where he is, or what he has done to himself.

—Are you kidding? said Maria.

—No, I'm not kidding. We have to find Francesco!

* * *

Frank Martin sat on a piling on MacMillian Pier in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He had been chain-smoking and was on his third cigarette since he finished washing the lunch dishes at the restaurant. A dirty white apron covered his jeans and flannel shirt. In the distance, he could see a crane with a bucket scoop lifting riprap sized limestone blocks from a barge and dropping them on the end of a breakwater. There was too much ambient noise to hear

the large stones landing, but in his head he heard the thud of the rocks landing on the six punks in the yard at Gowanus Crushed Stone and Concrete. Something switched in his head.

—Christ, what am I doing here? he asked a seagull strutting down the pier.

Frank couldn't remember how he got to Provincetown. He didn't know how long he'd been there. He did know that Thanksgiving was next week. His dishwashing job at the Marlin Spike Inn ended Sunday, November 28th when the restaurant closed for the winter. Today was Monday, November 22, 1976. He knew that because the staff had a big wall calendar in the kitchen and the chef marked off each day. There was something about November 22.

He watched the crane lift a bucket of stones; a stone fell from the bucket into Cape Cod Bay before the bucket was over the breakwater. The splash triggered a series of images: his cat Bounder's burial in Buttermilk Channel, Red Hook, Brooklyn; the Maple Tavern in SoHo; his Greene Street loft; painting a self-portrait. That was it! November 22, 1968, was his last day as a starving artist. He painted the self-portrait after being ridiculed by the local artists at The Maple Tavern about his name change. What was this name changed to, he wondered, and who made the change?

He tossed his cigarette butt into the bay. It was beginning to get dark and chilly. There was a 6:00 p.m. bus to Boston. He had enough time to go to his rented room, pack and catch the Boston bus. He removed his apron and tossed it in a trash receptacle on the pier.

In his room, he counted his money. He had over two thousand dollars. Searching his wallet, he found a return bus ticket to New York City. The purchase date was October 7, 1976. He had been gone for over six weeks. Gone from what? Who the hell was he and why was he somebody different?

He showered and loaded his backpack with his few belonging. He told his landlord that he was leaving.

—We're going to miss you, Don. You were an outstanding tenant. You're sure you don't want to experience a Cape Cod winter?

—No, thank you.

—Where are you going? Back to New York City?

—Yes, for now. I need to find someone.

—Good luck.

—Thank you.

He walked down Commercial Street toward the bus stop wondering who Don was. Why did his landlord call him Don? Not two hours ago he knew he was Frank, Frank Martin. He lived in Red Hook, Brooklyn. But he remembered he had another name. Hadn't he also lived on Greene Street in New York City?

—How long does it take to get to New York City? he asked the bus driver.

—You change in Boston for the New York City bus. If the roads are good, and this weather holds, you'll be in The Big Apple before sunrise tomorrow.

The bus was a local and stopped at every town on Route 6. Stuffed in the pocket of the seat back was a page from a newspaper. It had been carefully cut from the paper. He could make out the word Whitney. He pulled the paper from the seat back and opened the page.

The entire page was taken up with a picture of a familiar looking image. The text read: The Whitney Museum of American Art presents Francesco Martinelli's Modern Masterpiece: *Atmospheres*. Tickets on sale now. Closing January 5, 1977.

The bus to New York City was packed. Frank sat next to an Asian college-aged girl who was reading *The New Yorker*. Frank, who sat in the window seat, folded his leather jacket, put it against the bus window as a pillow and tried to sleep. He never slept, but hovered in a semi-awake state between dreaming and thinking. The Asian girl kept looking at Frank and returning to her magazine. Frank remembered some Asian woman playing the piano. Her back was to him, and she was nude. In his dreamlike state the pianist turned into a preying mantis.

—Excuse me, said the girl, noticing Frank's eyes were open.

—Yes.

—Aren't you Francesco Martinelli? You look exactly like this photograph of Francesco Martinelli in this article about his *Atmospheres* in *The New Yorker*.

—I'm afraid you've caught me off guard, said Frank.

—Well, are you the painter Francesco Martinelli?

Frank smiled at her but didn't answer. The girl returned to her magazine, which was open on her lap. When she flipped the page, there was a two-page spread of the first gallery with six of the *Atmospheres* canvases glowing in the darkened gallery.

—These are so cool, said the girl. I have tickets for tomorrow. My boyfriend is an art major at Cooper Union. We're going to this exhibit together. I can't believe this! You *are* Francesco Martinelli, aren't you?

Frank stared at the magazine. Looking at the gallery photo, blocks of frozen memory melted away like snow melt in a time-lapse film. Suddenly he could smell the gallery. He could hear Maria's voice pleading with him.

—The second canvas on the left is the first one I painted in the *Atmospheres* series, said Frank in a calm voice, barely knowing the words he was speaking. I derived the concept for these paintings from my earlier paintings using color-modulation, a technique I invented which has its roots in Paul Klee's color theories, *trompe l'oeil*, and perception theory.

—So you are, Francesco Martinelli, said the girl, wide-eyed.

—Yes, I'm your man.

—It says here your wife is Michiko, the virtuoso pianist.

—Their fact-checking department dropped the ball. We were never married though we lived together for seven years. She threw me out last January.

—She threw you out?

—Told me to leave is more correct, said Frank, with a slight grin on his face, the first grin in more than six weeks. May I see the article when you're finished with the magazine?

—Of course, Mr. Martinelli. And could you autograph the magazine?

—With pleasure. Do you have a pen?

The girl fumbled in her purse and withdrew a cheap ballpoint.

—What's your name?

—My Chinese name is Dandan, but you can call me Danielle.

—What does Dandan mean?

—It's a color, cinnabar red. The East is red you know.

Francesco signed her copy of *The New Yorker* "To Dandan, who discovered me on a bus. Francesco Martinelli."

* * *

The docent ran to Maria Monsanto's office. She knocked the office door.

—Yes, come in, said Maria.

—Maria, Maria. Guess who is in the third-floor galleries?

—Andy Warhol?

—Francesco Martinelli.

—Are you sure?

—Positive.

Maria bolted from her desk and ran up the stairs to the third floor, the docent in her wake. Indeed, there he was, Francesco Martinelli, engaged with the docent's group of visitors. He wore a flannel shirt, dirty Levis, hiking boots, and a brown leather bomber jacket. The visitors were in rapt attention to Francesco's explanation of the pictures.

When Francesco saw Maria, he held up his hands.

—Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to the genius lady who championed my art and is the curator of this show, Maria Monsanto.

The group turned to see their docent and Maria Monsanto approaching. Maria was dressed as always, as a business professional. There was a round of applause.

—Thank you, said Maria out of breath and blushing. Francesco is more than generous. We at the museum recognized his genius early. When he showed me the first *Atmospheres* paintings, I knew they were special. They are history book. We are pleased to be the first

museum to display these remarkable works. Regrettably, his agent, Angelique Brody, is not here to enjoy the fruits of her mentoring.

Francesco couldn't remember who Angelique Brody was, but assumed she was someone important in his unremembered past.

—Don't let us interrupt your talk to this group, said Maria. Maybe you will come to my office when you're finished.

—Your wish, my command, said Francesco, turning to the painting he was explaining.

—Well, as you can see, the role of green in this canvas is due to the permutations of blue and yellow. Notice...

Maria left the scene smiling.

—Yes, she said clapping her hands together. He's alive.

When she arrived at her office, she telephoned Albert.

—Yes, sweetheart, said Albert.

—Guess who is at the museum today?

—Andy Warhol?

—Francesco Martinelli.

—Frank is there, at the Whitney?

—On the third-floor galleries giving a tour of his paintings. He took over for one of our docents.

—How did he look?

—Tragic: sunken eyes, prominent cheekbones, unshaven, long ponytail, emaciated, and very tan, like he'd been living outdoors. Hard to know if he'd been living in the city on the streets or maybe back in Wisconsin.

—Did he say where he'd been?

—I couldn't talk to him because of the visitors, but I asked him to come to my office.

—I'm installing *Xanadu* at Mahler Galleries. Should I come to your office? It's only a few blocks away.

—Yes, you might make Francesco feel more at home.

* * *

Frank didn't recognize Albert. Maria explained who he was, but Frank didn't remember Albert.

—Frank, you were so helpful with Mr. Kardos when we met him at my loft.

—Kardos?

—He's my agent. He represents Mahler Galleries on Madison Avenue. Don't you remember?

—Oh, I see. What's your name again, sorry?

—Albert Pachis, your former neighbor in SoHo. I make those multi-perspective paintings.

—Sorry, Albert, but my mind is a blur. I'm not myself lately.

—I rescued you from the Maple Tavern and took you to my loft. Agoston Kardos was waiting for me at my loft. You helped me show my paintings and my model of *Xanadu*.

—If you say so. I don't remember anything. I witnessed the brutal murder of six young men. They shot my cat and burned all my paintings. That's all I remember. The next thing I remember was standing on MacMillan Pier in Provincetown yesterday.

Albert looked at Maria. Maria had her head bowed, her eyes tearing. Her artist's memory was missing, not only lost, but his previous life as a painter appeared to be forgotten. Would he ever paint again? Would he recover his memory? What brought on this amnesia? How could America's most exciting painter, be sitting in front of her and not be there?

—Do you remember a beautiful Italian woman? asked Maria, looking at Francesco with tears in her eyes.

Frank looked at Maria and wondered if she was talking about herself.

—The woman you danced with at the opening. She's very beautiful and from Venice, Italy.

—She has a beautiful voice?

—Yes.

—You went to her room at the Waldorf Hotel, said Albert. The night the thugs burned your paintings.

Frank sat on a chair with his head in his hands. He started to break down.

—The night they killed my cat, Bounder? he said into his hands.

—Yes, said Albert, worried about his friend's mental state.

—She is madly in love with you. Her name is Oriana Morosini. She lives in Venice, Italy, said Maria.

All the information was overwhelming to Frank. He was Don yesterday. Now he was Frank and probably Francesco Martinelli. Who was he and how did he get here? He needed more pieces to the puzzle.

Maria took a photograph from a bulletin board and handed it to Frank. It was a picture of Frank and Oriana dancing.

Frank examined the picture. At first his face looked dumbfounded, but gradually a big smile grew on his face.

—Yes, I remember now. Where is she?

—She's in Venice, Italy, said Maria. Do you want to talk to her? She wants to talk to you.

—Of course, he does, said Albert.

Frank wasn't so sure. How could he explain what he didn't know? Maria looked at her watch; it was five in the afternoon in Venice. She dialed the number for Galleria Fonte Nuova where Oriana was a curator. She told the receptionist, who answered the phone, that Francesco Martinelli wanted to speak with Oriana Morosini. She handed the telephone to Frank. Frank, his hands shaking, barely held it to his ear.

—*Pronto*, said Oriana.

—Oriana?

—Francesco!

Oriana unleashed a stream of Italian.

—Slowly, I'm just a poor American boy.

—Francesco. Come to Venezia. Please, please, come soon.

—Soon, I come to Venezia.

—I miss you, said Oriana.

—*Te amo*, said Francesco, hardly believing he was speaking with Oriana.

—*Ti bacio mille volte* I give you a thousand kisses.
—Me, also. *Mille bacci*, Oriana.
To be continued.

