The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 53

by Daniel Harris

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❄ ❄ ❄Albert, Maria, and Francesco decided to eat lunch at Sasha's Deli on Lexington Avenue near 74th Street, a pleasantly shabby place with excellent food and wiseacre waiters. Nearby office workers and medical office personnel filled the restaurant. In addition to the sit-down trade, Sasha's had a big delivery and takeout business.

Frank sat before a bowl of matzo ball soup and a pastrami sandwich; a daunting kosher dill pickle separated the two halves of the stacked sandwich. Albert had a Ruben sandwich, food enough for three. Maria chose a cup of cream of broccoli soup and a small house salad. Albert and Frank drank beer with their meal; Maria, a cup of coffee.

—So, Frank, said Albert, what are your plans? Are you going to visit Oriana in Venice, or were you just saying that?

—Of course, now that I remember who she is. But first I have to attend to a few pieces of business, like check my bank accounts, and talk to my landlord. I owe him rent. I hope he hasn't rented my space.

—They can't evict you for being a month or two late with the rent, said Maria.

—But his landlord is a Mafia crime boss, said Albert. I don't think they play by the rules.

—Is that true, Francesco? asked Maria.

—Yes and no, my landlord's also a friend of my dealer Dan Sarras.

Maria looked at Albert and mouthed, "Does he know?"

—Do I know what? asked Frank, reading Maria's lips.

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—Dan Sarras was in the news lately, said Albert.

—He was? said Frank. Christ, I hope not for something bad. You know he's got a record, but then he has friends in high places. They've helped him before.

—He's going to need them, said Maria. The police arrested Sarras in Monaco on a charge of contract murder. Gringovitch called me from Rome when he couldn't reach you. According to Gringovitch, Sarras wired you some money for the five color-modulation paintings he sold in Paris at the end of October. Anatoly wanted to know if you had received your payment. If you hadn't, then you probably will never see the money. If Sarras dodges the bullet in Monaco, he still faces serious charges in France.

—Jesus, said Frank. Why do I get all the luck?

—I guess there was some messy business about an Arshile Gorky painting. Allegedly, Sarras paid to have Isabella Sanitazzare murdered.

—The beautiful Isabella? Why the hell would Sarras want to kill her? They were negotiating with the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris to mount *Atmospheres* next November. Jesus, I guess that's the end of that. Other than losing that feather in my cap, how else do Sarras's troubles affect me?

—Well, Sarras is in jail. He can't act as your dealer.

—But I have no paintings. They were all destroyed.

—Yes, but you should have money coming your way, said Maria. Isabella called me the day after Sarras' sale at the Ritz; she told me that Sarras sold all five of your color-modulation paintings for an average price of $140,000. You should have something like $340,000 in your Chemical Bank account. If you don't, well I guess you'll have to see what happens to Sarras.

—But that is my everyday checking account. My big accounts are at J.P. Morgan, which Angelique set up for me. Last I remember they were frozen because Angelique's will was lost.

Frank suddenly stopped talking.

Wait a minute! Maria, said Frank, suddenly realizing a part of his memory had returned, you mentioned the name Angelique Brody

this morning, but I couldn't remember who she was. Now I remember who she is. I'm getting my memory back. And now I know who you are Albert. Angelique died in a plane crash back in April, right?

Frank looked at Albert and Maria. They had big smiles on their faces.

—Francesco, said Maria, clasping her hands in glee, this is such good news. Your memory is coming back. I have been praying for you. Yes, poor Angelique died tragically in a plane crash in St. Thomas last April.

—Yeah, I was worried I'd lost you, said Albert.

—Jewish magic! Matzo ball soup, it works every time, said Frank, smiling. The old Frank is back, or at least some parts of him.

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Frank sat in Emma Peyole's modest office. Everything was perfectly organized, so much so, that Frank thought he was back in Dr. Andrea Jawarski's office at Bellevue Hospital. Peyole was Angelique Brody's attorney and executor of her estate.

—I've been trying to contact you for the last month, Francesco. Angelique's attaché case was found in the wreckage of the plane. It was badly burned, but inside were Angelique's will and copies of her financial documents.

—That sounds promising, said Francesco.

—The problem is the way Angelique set up your account at J.P. Morgan. It was a joint account, so there is a large tax liability. I had to pay Angelique's taxes owed by that account.

—Why was it a joint account? I thought it was all my money.

—Well, it may have been, but Angelique paid your expenses from that account.

—What expenses?

—Storage, PR, the usual things to promote and protect your interests.

—I thought she took that from her cut.

—No, the transaction records indicate she withdrew funds to pay those bills. For instance, there's a monthly transfer of $1200 to Grillo Moving and Storage for storing and insuring your paintings.

—Jesus, I was being hosed. So what's the bad news on the tax bill?

—A big number I'm afraid. Angelique planned well, but there have been some changes in the tax code, which may be why she was carrying those documents with her..

—So what's the number?

—The total bill came to $138,464.48. The remaining balance is $121,807.10. The balance of the account before taxes was $260,271.58. And there's more bad news. Now that the account balance is below $250,000 J.P. Morgan is closing the account. They will mail you a check for the balance, minus a transaction fee.

—I've been screwed. Michiko was correct; both women took advantage of me.

—Who is Michiko?

—The piano virtuoso. She was my girlfriend until January of this year.

—You broke up?

—She asked me to leave. I was adversely affecting her performance career with my depressions. I can't and don't blame her.

—You were a high-powered couple.

—Yes, said Francesco, looking out the window at the office building across the street.

He didn't feel high-powered today. If anything he felt like a fool. All those arguments with Michiko and in the end both Elaine Aster and Angelique Brody *were* stealing from him. Michiko had been correct all along. If I see Michiko again, I'll tell her what a fool I was not to listen to her.

—Ms. Peyole, you're telling me I've lost most of my money to *Angelique's* taxes.

—Yes, I'm afraid so. It is clear to me from conversations with Angelique in the months before she died that she was going to restructure how she invested her artist's earnings.

—You'd think those capitalist bastards at J.P.Morgan would know how to reduce my tax bill.

—Angelique's methods did make you money, regrettably since you have to withdraw your funds from that investment account, you'll have to pay *your* tax bill, so you will receive less than the number I quoted you.

—My personal account is at Chemical Bank. Can't Morgan transfer my money to my account? How am I going to deposit a check that big?

— J.P.Morgan can transfer the money to Chemical Bank. That's the safest way. You don't want to be walking around with a bank check that big in your wallet. I would suggest opening an account at another bank, like Chase or First National City. Remember there's a $100,000 limit on FDIC insurance for each depositor. You should split your money between two banks. I would also suggest putting some of your money in Certificates of Deposit. They will pay you better interest than a savings account.

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When Frank stopped at the Chemical Bank branch near Peyole's office, he discovered that no money had been transferred into his account in the last two months. His balance was a little over $12,000. He had $2,200 in his wallet from his employment as a dishwasher and handyman. Tomorrow he would deal with opening a new account and moving his money from J.P. Morgan. Before he went back to Brooklyn, he needed to check on flights to Venice. In the meantime, he would pay his past due rent and pay a year's rent in advance. At least he would have a place to work and live. If he were frugal, he could live for five or six years on his savings. He still had to find a new dealer. He knew he could sell paintings if he could find a dealer.

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Anthony Zambrano, his landlord, had an office on Fourth Avenue near the corner of Garfield Place in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Frank exited the R train at Union Street and walked south on Fourth Avenue toward Garfield Place.

Frank entered the establishment, a former heating oil company office. There were three *goombas* lounging on well-worn task chairs. Zambrano sat in an oversized black leather swivel chair behind a cheap metal desk. He was arguing with someone on the telephone. The office could have been a stage set for a 1940's *noir* gangster film. Zambrano slammed the handset down on the receiver. His face was red, and a line of spittle dripped from his chin.

—What the fuck you want? said Zambrano, wiping his face with a white handkerchief.

—I'm here to pay my rent. I've been out of town.

—You're not a moment too soon. I was gonna evict your sorry ass.

—But why?

—Why? You're asking me why? Those punks almost burned down my property because you shot at them.

—Hell, those fuckers shot at me first, said Frank, standing his ground.

—Francesco, I like you, but if a problem like that comes up again, you call me. I'm the law in this part of Brooklyn.

—Yes, sir.

—Hey, you goombas, said Zambrano, issuing a chuffy “yah” sound from his throat, did your hear what the kid just said? He said: "Yes, sir." And he doesn't even work for me. You could learn something from him.

—How much do I owe you, Mister Zambrano? asked Frank, eager to end his visit.

—Wait one fucking minute.

Zambrano pulled out a dark green cash ledger. He leafed through it until he found the page he wanted.

—Kid, you owe two months, plus a hundred dollar late fee, 1100 clams.

—Cash work for you? asked Frank, knowing the answer.

—Come on, Francesco, what the fuck do you think?

—I got that and more. And I'm going away again. Did you fix the broken door?

—Francesco, don't piss me off. Of course it's fixed, and we cleaned up the mess. I bought you a new fridge, a bulletproof front door, and a powered roll-up garage door.

—And an alarm system, said one of the goombas.

—We're a first class operation, Art Man, said another goomba. Here are your new keys.

—I'm impressed, said Frank, hoping to diffuse the tension. Thank you.

—Did you hear about your friend Sarras? asked Zambrano.

—Yes, sir.

—Don't sweat it kid. He's gonna be free in six months. I know it.

—So, Mr. Zambrano, said Frank, if I give you $6,000 for a year and the $1000 I owe you, will you drop the late fee?

—Will you listen to this kid? said Zambrano, laughing so hard his belly heaved. He's trying to deal me. Francesco, or whoever the fuck you are, listen, and listen real good. You owe me sixty grand for putting those punks under the rocks. Don't push your luck.

—Sixty grand?

—Mario, said Zambrano, pointing at one of his goons, show him the gun you used.

Mario went into a back room and returned with Frank's sawed off shotgun.

—As you saw, this gun messed those punks up big-time. When, and if, the cops find the bodies, they're gonna be lookin' for this gun. They could find it in your possession. It has your fingerprints all over it.

—Are you blackmailing me? asked Frank, starting to sweat.

—Francesco, said Zambrano, rising from his desk and putting his arm around Frank's shoulder. You and me, we're business partners. Regular capital crime buddies. Did I ask you for sixty grand?

—No, sir.

—Fuhgeddaboudit, said Zambrano, kissing Frank on the cheek. But keep your fucking mouth shut. Don't even tell your fucking shrink. What happens in Brooklyn stays in Brooklyn.

—How do you know I have a shrink? asked Frank, starting to feel insecure.

—You're one fucked up puppy. You gotta have a shrink. Look at your fuckin' art. It's lunatic stuff.

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Frank was impressed with what Zambrano's people had done to his space. In addition to the new doors and refrigerator, they had sanded the floors and sealed them. The oak floors were spectacular. Much classier than the whitewash Frank had used. Zambrano's men completely renovated the bathroom and installed a shower and tub. The kitchen area was painted and new cabinets and sink were installed. A new toaster oven and microwave unit sat on the marble countertop. The only thing missing was his cat Bounder. He didn't want to think about that; it was too awful. His easels stood in an orderly row; boxes of brushes and other tools of the trade lined shelves. Most of his sketchbooks survived as did folios of drawings and watercolors, but all the oil paintings were gone. The punks had destroyed them all.

In addition to food shopping, he would have to find some used carpets to cover the studio floor. He didn't want to incur Zambrano's wrath if he should spill paint on those beautiful floors.

He checked his watch; it was four in the afternoon, ten p.m. in Venice. He telephoned Oriana.

—*Pronto*, said Oriana in a sleepy voice.

—Did I wake you?

—Francesco! Francesco, it's you.

—I am missing you.

—I miss you too, Francesco.

—I have some bad news. I can't leave for Venice tomorrow. I need to take care of some business. My dealer, Dan Sarras, is in jail in Monaco. I have booked a flight for December 20th. I arrive in Venice on the 21st. Will you be there?

—Yes, yes, come soon.
—It will be Christmas week. Noel. Maybe you have plans.
—Only for you, Francesco. Please come soon.
To be continued.