The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 55

by Daniel Harris

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❄ ❄ ❄**Venice, Italy, January 3, 1977**

The rising sun was hidden from his eyes by the hips of the woman next to him in the bed. She was on her side facing him with both her hands tucked between her thighs. Her breathing had a slight purr as she slept. Lustrous black hair covered her shoulders and breasts.

It had rained during the night, and he had pulled the curtains back to open the French doors and listen to the rain falling on the canal. They had lain entwined under the covers, but now in the morning he had kicked off the covers to gaze upon his sleeping beauty.

This was Francesco's last morning in Venice. His show at the Whitney Museum closed in two days. He had to return to New York to supervise the packing and storing of his paintings.

Francesco didn't know what he was going to do with this woman. He was madly in love with her. She was a delight, but she could also be jealous and possessive. Last night at dinner, she broke down weeping because he was leaving and not taking her with him to New York. He told her there was no place for a woman of her class and breeding in his Red Hook crib. She lived on the top floor of her family's mansion in the Castello *sestiere* of Venice. After her parents died, she rented the lower floors to an old Venetian family.

The Venice experience had been a great success for him. He had painted one picture that sold for more than enough to cover his expenses for the trip. He had been granted a residency at Galleria Fonte Nuova to begin after the Easter holidays. He would have to

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find better housing in New York if he wanted to keep his relationship with Oriana.

The dawn light grazed the top of Oriana's hip, backlighting the subtle contours of her flesh. If he squinted, crepuscular rays formed from the light passing through small slats of the shutters. The pale light dappled the white flesh of her hip with small pools of slowly changing pastel pinks, blues, and greens.

—What are you thinking, Francesco? Oriana, now awake, was studying Francesco's face.

—Nothing. I was enjoying the dawn light on your hip and thinking I couldn't ever capture that in paint. The light changes too quickly.

—But Francesco, you don't paint figures.

—Sometimes I do. If I did paint your hip in this light, it would be a difficult task. It's like watching an animation of one of my color-modulation paintings.

Hearing the words reminded him of the fate of that ill-fated series of thirty paintings, one sold at auction for $65,000. Sarras supposedly sold five in Paris for big money. Frank had yet to receive payment. And then Brooklyn punks burned the rest. He turned his head and looked into Oriana's eyes.

—You have such big eyes, said Francesco, turning on his side to face her directly. And the scoleras are so white and clear.

—Your eyes are so intense. I always think you can see through my clothes into my soul.

—Well, it's easy now, he laughed, you're nude.

—Nude? Not naked?

He looked into her eyes.

—Oriana, your nude body is a work of art. Naked is for children and old people.

He wanted to make love to her one last time, but he was afraid she would make a scene afterward, begging him to take her with him to New York. She was weary of the parochial attitudes and politics of Venice, a small city trying to keep Rome at bay, but trapped, like Greece, by a glorious history that was its only commercial coin.

—Francesco, when do you have to leave for the plane?

—After lunch. I have a lunch date with Alfredo.

—May I accompany you?

He didn't answer. If she made a scene, it would be embarrassing. She had broken down last night at dinner and again when they were cuddled in the bed listening to the rain pattering on the balcony.

—You're not answering me, she said in a singsong voice.

Francesco turned on his back and stared at the plaster moldings on the ceiling.

—It's difficult to say, he said. I have mood swings. Women don't like that. They become upset. My ex-wife and Michiko left me because of my depressions. My first wife even said I was schizoid because I didn't like to be around people.

Oriana turned her back to him. He could see her shoulders shake.

—Please don't. It is difficult enough leaving you for New York without you making a scene.

He lay there counting the roses in the ornate plaster relief around the chandelier. How could he take her to New York City? She didn't have enough pedigree to land a job at one of the big museums, galleries or auction houses. No college would take her on the faculty with her Italian degrees and limited English. Venice was an anachronism; New York was in-your-face commerce and wealth. When he was down on his luck and had applied for a job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as one of their artist liaisons, he lost out to Caroline Kennedy. Family and money are requisite cachét in those lofty realms. He lived in a cold-water building in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He slept on a futon he found on the streets of Park Slope. Oriana's home was a palazzo. His was an abandoned propeller repair shop that had been a sail loft in the age of sail.

—I should make you some coffee, she said.

—Thank you, sweetheart. Or do you want me to do it?

—No, I need to clean up. I'll put the coffee on. Listen for it.

When he heard the stovetop espresso maker begin to espress, he rose and went into the kitchen. He turned off the flame. He could

hear her singing in the shower. He walked into the shower and took her into his arms.

They sat on the bed wrapped in bath sheets drinking their coffee. Oriana's hair was piled high on her head and wrapped in a thick towel.

—Oriana, you know how I feel about you, but I can't see you living in my hovel. Yours is a beautiful home. My home is a slum.

—But you've sold so many paintings, and there will be many more sales. There is a future. What are you saying? Is this your dark side?

—Practical side, hardly morbid. How can I ask a beautiful, cultured, intelligent woman like you to share my life in an ugly violent slum?

—Francesco, I believe in you. We will find better lodgings. You are going to be famous. You already are. Wait until you return to New York, people will be clamoring for your work. Everything will work out. I want to share your success with you. Find us a good home in New York.

He tried to picture her in twenty-five years, a proud mother and international art doyen. But then in twenty-five years, he would be sixty if his depression didn't slip the leash. What would Michiko think when she saw Oriana with all her European sophistication, cultured hauteur, and vivaciousness? What would Oriana think when she heard the raw emotional power of Michiko's performances? The contrast was daunting. Best keep to his solitary life. But, how tantalizing this future with Oriana was. She didn't have a mean bone in her body, but could he trust his future to her? Her simple joy of life lifted him from any dark thoughts.

Michiko was history. How long would it take Oriana to leave? Would she ask him to quit smoking? Would he do it?

Oriana put her arms around him

—Francesco, love me one more time, slowly, she said, pulling off the bath sheet and lying back on the bed

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Red Hook, Brooklyn

When he entered his crib on Van Dyke Street, the first thing he noticed was that the answering machine tape was full. After he had unpacked and taken a shower, he dutifully played back the tape and took notes in his tattered Moleskine notebook. Most of the messages were from former classmates and teachers who had been in New York for the holidays. There was one from Honoré Boncourt, curator of Contemporary Painting at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, who wanted him to call as soon as possible. Another was from Dan Sarras: "Frank, I sold your paintings. I owe you money. I'm in a difficult situation at the moment. I will wire you the money as soon as I can. I'll call again for account numbers." The last message was from Michiko: "Francesco. I saw a photograph of you with that drop-dead gorgeous *Italiana* in *Oggi* magazine. Call me."

It was six in the evening. He walked to Carroll Gardens and ate in an Italian restaurant. Compared to Italy, the food was dreadful. Compared to American Italian restaurant fare, it was cuisine. When he returned to his loft, there was a message on his machine: "Francesco, why are you not answering your phone? Are you with that Japanese *musica*? Call me as soon as you receive this message. *Bacci*, Francesco. *Te amo. Ciao, ciao*."

Francesco looked at his watch. It was eight at night, two in the morning in Venice. The time stamp on the message was five minutes ago.

He found his address book and dialed Oriana. She answered on the first ring.

—Francesco?

—Yes, Oriana, it's me. How are you?

—Missing you.

—Me, too. It's 4 degrees Celsius here. You would be sneezing and freezing.

—But you would keep me warm.

—All I have is a smelly sleeping bag and a few old sweaters. This time of the year, I wear a knit watch cap. When it's very cold, I sleep in my overcoat.

—Now I worry about you.

—Don't. I'm a New York survivor. I haven't died yet, and I've made my best paintings in New York.

—It is warm in my bed, and I miss you.

—Well, don't go Dido on me and throw the bed into the canal. We will need it when I visit.

—Francesco, are you really going to visit me?

—Of course, of course, my dear. For me, it was a long, sad flight to New York from Venice. I must go to Paris soon and will come to Venice when I'm finished with business there.

—I love you, Francesco.

—I love you, too, but I have to hang up. My phone will disconnect in a few seconds.

He pressed the switch hook and ended the call. Oriana was a desirable problem. He wanted Oriana, but he was leery of someone so emotional and possessive. He loved her classic body and her positive spirit. It would be exciting to have a beautiful woman and an upturn in his art fortunes at the same time.

Michiko was the familiar ground of good and bad memories. Michiko was emotionally stable, but she could bring on his black moods with her overbearing Oriental superiority. Tomorrow he would call Michiko, or maybe not.

He put on his warm knit cap, removed his shoes, jeans, and shirt before crawling into his sleeping bag. He could hear the rats scurrying in the walls. He lit a Camel and lay smoking in the dark. The horns and whistles in the harbor were a poetic counterpoint to the drone of traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. A dark cloud flittered in the periphery of his vision. When he closed his eyes, he saw the Venetian sun rising over Oriana's hip. He prayed this new dawn would cauterize his wound of darkness.

To be continued.

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