The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 57

by Daniel Harris

Click on my name above. It will take you to my homepage where you will find links to more stories and previous chapters of "The Nude Pianist."

❊ ❊ ❊

February 1989, Park Slope, Brooklyn

Anatoly Gringovitch and his best friend since grade school in Chicago the internationally respected musician and composer, Ben Clarone, sat in Gringovitch's kitchen cracking pistachio nuts and drinking beer.

—So, have you seen Frank Martin lately? asked Anatoly.

—As a matter of fact, I did. Last Sunday, Monique and I spent the day at the Bronx Zoo with our four boys and their two boys. When we walked Marcello and Raphael to their house from the subway, we could hear Frank yelling at Oriana a block away. Not pretty at all. We decided to take all the boys to Two Boots for pizza. When we returned to their house, Oriana looked like she had been crying and Frank was gone.

—There's something going on with Frank, said Anatoly, cracking a pistachio nut. You know, Oriana had to spend the year in Italy doing research for her biography of Artemisia Gentileschi. Something happened to Frank while she was gone.

—For sure, said Ben. My wife Monique kept telling me something was not right in the Martinelli household. She could tell it from the way the twins acted when they came to play with our sons. We just figured it was because they missed their mother.

—Christ, who wouldn't miss Oriana? She's one in a million. I missed her, and she's only a neighbor.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/daniel-harris/the-nude-pianist-a-novel-chapter-57»*
Copyright © 2015 Daniel Harris. All rights reserved.

—Yeah, said Ben, raising an eyebrow, but you missed lusting after her, you old hellrake.

—She's off limits for me. My wife and Oriana are like family, a pair of gossipy Venetians. They prattle on in Italian a couple of times a week. I don't know what Frank's phone bill is like, but I know mine is outrageous. It's not much cheaper when they're both in Italy.

Anatoly's wife, Francesca, Franny to friends and family, walked into the kitchen and took a sip of Anatoly's beer and a pistachio nut.

—Did you know that Oriana took the boys and flew back to Italy? said Franny. She claims Francesco was unfaithful and was messing around with one of his students.

—Franny, are you sure? said Anatoly in disbelief.

—Frank might be crazy, said Ben, but he loves Oriana too much to do something like that. She's the best medicine he's ever had.

—Certainly better than the drugs the doctors keep pushing on him, said Anatoly.

—Well, I was just talking to Oriana, and she's certain he was having an affair with that older Jewish woman who was in his class two years ago. Oriana saw some pretty explicit nudes of her that Francesco painted.

—Franny, said Anatoly, that might be true about the paintings, but I seriously doubt Francesco was sleeping with her.

—Well, said Franny, Oriana says they were pretty detailed in the nooks and crannies department. Not your chaste academic nudes. More like pornography.

—So what's going to happen to Frank now? asked Ben.

They all looked at each other knowing the answer.

—Christ, I hope he doesn't go off the rails, said Anatoly, venturing to mention the elephant in the room. If he goes manic in a big way, he could end up in a straight jacket receiving electro-shock therapy.

—Poor Oriana, what will she do then? asked Ben.

—Well, she's a mother, said Franny, she has to protect her children. That's her first responsibility. Apparently, Francesco is drinking heavily and using cocaine. Oriana says he's been arrested for fighting twice. It's not good whatever is happening to our friend.

❊ ❊ ❊

Friday, May 25, 1990, Park Slope, Brooklyn

Ben Clarone, who was practicing a new composition for bass clarinet, put his bass clarinet on its stand and answered the telephone.

—Ben Clarone speaking.

—Ben, it's Monique. You have to run to the middle school and get Marcello and Raphael. Do not let them go home or listen to the radio, watch TV or see a late newspaper.

—What's going on, sweetheart?

—Francesco Martinelli just hung himself in his Duane Street studio.

Ben stood speechless with the phone to his ear.

—Ben! Ben! yelled Monique. Did you hear me?

—Yes, dear. Jesus Christ, what a fucking mess. Goddamn it!

—Well, get moving. I'm trying to find Oriana. She's not at her office. The police told me she's at St. Vincent Hospital in the Village. I'm going there. I'll tell her we have the boys and not to worry.

—God damn it to hell. Frank, how could you leave us like this, you selfish bastard! Oh, those poor boys and their mother.

❊ ❊ ❊

Friday, June 2, 1990, Park Slope, Brooklyn

Anatoly Gringovitch and Ben Clarone stood staring at the Persian rug on the floor of Gringovitch's parlor. They had just come from the internment of their friend and colleague Francesco Martinelli, or Frank Martin, as they always knew him.

—Did I ever show you my one Martin painting? asked Anatoly. And I do mean Frank Martin, it was painted when he was still Frank Martin.

—No, what painting is it?

—Come, I keep it in my painting studio upstairs.

The two men climbed to the fourth floor and entered Anatoly's Brooklyn studio.

—There, on the wall, said Anatoly, pointing to the painting. It's the self-portrait he painted on the last day he was a starving artist, November 22, 1968.

—That's a long way from *Atmospheres* or the later paintings. How did you end up with this? asked Ben.

—Frank gave it to me. There's a dedication on the back.

—What's amazing to me, and I'm just a dumb musician, is how a guy who could be so lucid and brilliant could simultaneously be such a mental wreck. Think of the brutal labor involved in the *Atmospheres* series. How the fuck did he do all that with his debilitating problems?

—He used to say he could only do it because he *was* crazy. He claimed he had a third personality. That third personality suppressed all the other states of his mind, the depression, and the mania. He told me that was the personality that did the painting, especially after he began doing those color-modulation pieces.

—Jesus, Anatoly, that's really fucked up.

—As Frank would say, "When you're right you're right."

—Yeah, but I'm still pissed off and sad when I think about Frank. What a tragic waste, said Ben punching his palm for emphasis. I couldn't look at Oriana or the two sons at the cemetery; it just made me want to yank the corpse out of the casket and shake some sense or shame into that crazy selfish genius.

—Easy Ben, he's dead and all of us will have to deal with it as best we can, said Anatoly. But I have an idea. We should make a short film of his paintings. We need to celebrate his art, which wasn't crazy. Not his life, or his death, just the wonderful art he left the world. You're the perfect composer to write the soundtrack.

Ben walked over to that desperate 1968 self-portrait of Frank Martin, painted the last night before he became Francesco Martinelli. Ben examined it from a musician's perspective. There was music and rhythm in the portrait.

—Frank, you may be dead, said Ben to the portrait, but you're not gone. You will live in my music and your art.

❊ ❊ ❊

Monday, June 18, 1990, Picnic House, Prospect Park, Brooklyn
Memorial Service for Francesco Martinelli

Ben Clarone's octet, Pieces of Eight, had just finished playing Ben's extended suite, *Portrait In The Abstract*, based on Frank Martin's self-portrait before he became Francesco Martinelli. The applause kept growing and growing. Eventually, it became a rhythmic chant: Encore! Encore! Encore!

—Thank you. Thank you very much, said Ben into the microphone, holding his hands palms down to quiet the crowd. This is a memorial service, not a jazz concert. We have for you now a special treat. In a salute to our great friend Francesco Martinelli, whose 48th birthday would have been today, Anatoly Gringovitch, the only painter the equal of Francesco, and I have created a film of the best of Francesco Martinelli's paintings, or as we knew him before he was famous: Frank Martin. The band will supply a live musical accompaniment. To do this properly, I've had to augment our octet with twenty players, who are arranging themselves behind me as I speak. The film is only twelve minutes long, so those of you standing rest easy. No Wagner here. [Scatter laughter.] Oh, it is important that I mention that the incredible pianist, Michiko, a most special friend from Francesco's early career, performs the solo piano section at the end. Please, a round of applause for Michiko and the other outstanding musicians who have gladly and generously donated their talents to this event. [Sustained clapping with an occasional inappropriate, for a memorial service, whistle.]

The film displayed Francesco's talents from his early days at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to his final, and what most critics considered, his finest and most skilled color-modulation paintings done a year or two before his death. When the last painting in the film came on the screen at the end, Michiko began to play one of the most challenging and emotionally charged piano compositions Ben had ever composed. It not only confirmed the virtuosity of the pianist in the picture but emotionally it took the listener through all the stages of Francesco's mental illness while

honoring his talents. A lone spotlight shone on the back of Michiko's body stocking clad nude body as she animated the projected masterpiece, *The Nude Pianist*.

To be continued.