

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 58

by Daniel Harris

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Epilogue: Part 1

*On October 14, 2009 Oriana Morosini appeared as the guest author on America's most popular live television book show: **The Author Answers***

Cameron Carter: Welcome to **The Author Answers**. I'm your host Cameron Carter. Tonight's author is Oriana Morosini who's latest book, *Abattage of a Painter: The Life and Death of Francesco Martinelli* is the biography of her late husband, the American artist, Francesco Martinelli. Ms. Morosini is the author of two other biographies of painters: Artemisia Gentileschi, a seventeenth-century painter, and Hedda Sterne, a 20th-century Abstract Expressionist painter. The latter biography won the National Book Award in biography. Ms. Morosini is a curator of contemporary painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She is the mother of two grown sons: Marcello, whose designs for children's playgrounds are iconic; and his younger brother Raphael, a professor of Advanced Theoretical Mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

CC: It is with great pleasure I again welcome Oriana Morosini to **The Author Answers**.

Oriana Morosini: Thank you, a pleasure to be here.

[Oriana has maintained her figure and is dressed in a perfectly tailored light blue suit with a stunning hand painted silk scarf. A dark blue beret compliments her thick silver shoulder-length hair. She sits with perfect posture and speaks beautifully with a charming

Italian accent. At 66, Oriana is still the most classically beautiful woman in any setting. She exudes charm, class and beauty. It is clear to the viewers and studio audience that she captivates her interlocutor.]

CC: Oriana, you never change. You look the same as you did last time you were on the show when you spoke about *The Irascible Hedda Sterne*, your National Book Award biography of Hedda Sterne.

OM: Thank you, you are too kind. My roof has turned silver, [She points to her hair] and I now use glasses to read.

CC: Oriana, I saw you smiling when I mentioned that Raphael is Marcello's younger brother. Would you explain that for our live audience and home viewers?

OM: Certainly, [*smiling*], it's a family joke. They are fraternal twins, born twelve minutes apart. Marcello was born on October 1, 1978, at 11:54 pm and Raphael was born on October 2, 1978 at 12:06 am. Perfectly balanced like their sign, Libra. I might add to this New York City audience that they are Brooklyn born. [*Cheers from the live audience.*]

CC: That must have been an ordeal.

OM: It was harder on Francesco! He claims he held his breath for the entire twelve minutes between births. He was squeezing my hand. I will always remember his tight grip on my hand. With twins, it's not over until it's over — one of Francesco's favorite sayings.

CC: Your biography of Francesco Martinelli is quite controversial. Let me begin by asking you what made you decide to write the biography rather than leave that to someone further removed from the subject?

OM: Good question. Let me explain. There were many events in Francesco's life and death that I believed only I could contextualize in a proper manner without sensationalizing those details. Francesco was a complex man. He had demons, but during our marriage, he mostly kept them in check until the very end. Those of us closest to him, like the artists Anatoly Gringovitch and Albert Pachis, musicians Ben Clarone and Michiko Mita, and, of course,

myself — we all tried to help him in his struggle with bipolar syndrome. We all failed in different ways.

CC: You write that after Francesco's death you and Michiko, the virtuoso pianist, who lived with Francesco for seven years, met for the first time. Paint that scene for our viewers.

OM: Isn't it incredible that during the thirteen years Francesco and I were married, we never attended any of Michiko's many New York City concerts? We saw her on television and owned most of her recordings. Francesco, of course, heard her perform many times when they were living together. But during our marriage, I never saw her perform live. I did hear her play at Francesco's memorial service, but we did not speak. One night when I was working in my office at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I saw that Michiko was giving a recital in our auditorium. I attended the last half of the concert. Afterward, I introduced myself. She graciously invited me to her home that weekend for dinner.

CC: This was after the funeral?

OM: Oh my, yes. It was over a year later, spring of 1992. Michiko did not attend the funeral, but she did, as I mentioned, perform at the memorial service. Michiko prepared a delicious Japanese dinner for us. In her study hangs Francesco's *The Nude Pianist*, which depicts Michiko playing the piano nude. It is life-size, and her back is to the viewer, but she dominates the picture, just as she can dominate a piano. It is Francesco's first masterpiece. I, of course, knew the story of the painting and the later role it played in Francesco's death. Until that evening, Michiko did not know the role that painting, or rather copies of it, played in Francesco's final breakdown. When I explained those things to her, she became very upset and accused me of not properly taking care of Francesco. She claimed she was the only one in Francesco's life that knew how to handle his mood swings. She accused me of hastening his death by approving the electro-shock therapy. We did not part as friends.

CC: So, do you know if Michiko has read your biography?

OM: Thank you for asking, because it allows me to clear up some nasty gossip. Michiko telephoned me three months ago and

congratulated me on how accurately I described her years with Francesco. She apologized for accusing me of mishandling Francesco's illness. She said she knew Francesco well enough to know what I had suffered. The conversation ended on a positive high note. We promised to remain in contact. In fact, two weeks ago, I hosted a party for her at my palazzo after her solo recital at La Fenice, the historic opera house in Venice.

CC: You write that you first met Francesco Martinelli at a private viewing of his paintings in October 1968. Can you fill us in on this history? You were married when you first met Francesco, correct?

OM: Yes, I was married, though not happily. [*Oriana takes a sip of water*] Elaine Aster, his first dealer, had a preview of Francesco's first solo gallery show for selected clients. I happened to be in New York interviewing for a curating position at the old Janus Gallery on 57th Street. Elaine knew me from my position at Galleria Fonte Nuova in Venice, Italy.

CC: We should tell the audience that you're a native of Venice, Italy and are a direct descendant of one of the Venetian Republic's most decorated Generals and Doges.

OM: Yes, Morosini is indeed a famous name in Venetian history. But to continue, I first met Francesco at this little preview held at a warehouse, but we only conversed for a few minutes. My conversational English was not good then, and Francesco did not speak Italian. It wasn't until his *Atmospheres* show at the Whitney in October of 1976, eight years later, that we finally connected. We were married on June 18, 1977, on his parent's apple farm in Door County, Wisconsin, a beautiful property, but a difficult way to make a living.

CC: You mentioned *Atmospheres*, your late husband's most famous legacy. Tell us about what happened to those paintings.

OM: Oh, a crazy story, but with a happy ending. But before I get into that, let me tell you a little of Francesco's Color Modulation technique which was the precursor of *The Atmospheres* paintings. Color Modulation technique came out his study of the psychology of color theory, notably from Goethe and Paul Klee.

To create his theory of color modulation, Francesco had to forge a new language, abandoning linear and aerial perspective and making the spatial dispositions arise from the modulations of color. Color was the emotion, the space, and the design. It was a complex and multi-leveled approach to easel painting. It was a difficult discipline to conquer.

CC: That's pretty heavy

OM: Yes, but Francesco was a brilliant man, sometimes a loose cannon, but brilliant nonetheless. Now to continue with the story of the *Atmospheres* paintings.

After the Whitney show closed in January 1977, the paintings were crated and shipped to Paris, where they were to be shown at the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Pompidou Center beginning in November 1978. Unfortunately, the woman who initiated the deal for Francesco, Isabella Sanitizzare, was brutally murdered before she could finalize the arrangements. Francesco's then-dealer, Dan Sarras, was arrested in connection with the murder of a KGB agent provocateur. Angélique Brody, his dealer, agent, and lawyer had died in a plane crash the year before. Francesco was left without any advisers. Ever the opportunist, Elaine Aster, who had been fired by Francesco in 1974 for stealing from him, convinced Francesco to let her handle the negotiations. Elaine completed the negotiations to everyone's satisfaction, and the show was set to open November 1, 1978, and run for four months. The show was a big success, setting attendance records. After the show closed, the paintings were moved to a warehouse outside of Paris. Francesco, of course, assumed that they would be shipped back to him in New York.

Before I continue with the story, let me give you an insight into Francesco's personality at this time. When the show opened at the Pompidou Center in Paris, the boys were a month old. Francesco, the proud father and husband, pushed the little perambulator all over Paris. He told everyone he had the most beautiful wife and children of any man alive. The French were wonderful. By the time the show closed, probably half the population of Paris had cooed

over the boys and asked Francesco for his autograph or a quick sketch. He was in high feather and obliged everyone. We could never pay for a meal or a coffee. For a hard-core recluse, Francesco was totally out of character. Later I learned he was in a “happy” manic mode. Those were happy times, but Francesco was under the influence of his disease.

We stayed in Paris for the duration of the show. After the show closed, Francesco supervised the crating of the paintings. When he was finished, we flew to Venice to present our young family to my relatives and our Venetian friends.

But, there was a problem: Elaine Aster never negotiated for the return of the paintings. They were in a warehouse until 1996. No one remembered where the paintings were stored. After searching for years before and after Francesco's death, I assumed they had been stolen, like all of Francesco's unsold paintings. Imagine my surprise when Dan Sarras telephoned me from Paris and told me he found the *Atmospheres* paintings! Sarras said he would cover the past-due storage fees, but I would have to pay the shipping costs. Well, at the time, I was in no position to pay. I was facing over \$300,000 in legal fees in the fight to regain control of Francesco's art. Fortunately, Garth Whipple, the noted art collector and philanthropist, heard of my dilemma and offered to pick up the \$50,000 FedEx bill, on condition that I donate the entire *Atmospheres* series to MoMA.

CC: You write that this oversight by Elaine Aster was intentional. Can you explain that?

OM: Yes, that came out at her trial in Zurich. She was planning on selling those paintings surreptitiously. She had moved the paintings from their original warehouse outside of Paris to Lyon, France. Francesco's dealer, Dan Sarras, loathed Elaine Aster for stealing Francesco's art. When Sarras was exchanged for a former KGB spy in 1996, he went after Elaine Aster with a vengeance. Elaine had not only stolen our family's legacy, but as Francesco's dealer, all Sarras's potential commissions. In the process of finding

evidence against Elaine Aster, Sarras stumbled upon the *Atmospheres* paintings in Lyon.

CC: The plot thickens. Please, continue with the *Atmospheres* story.

OM: So I agreed to Garth Whipple's terms on the condition that the entire *Atmospheres* collection never be dispersed. Francesco always wanted them to be shown as a unified group. He considered them one painting with sixteen parts. MoMA was, of course, more than pleased to add the *Atmospheres* paintings to their permanent collection. 2011 will be the thirty-fifth anniversary of the first showing of those paintings at the Whitney in 1976. MoMA is planning an *Atmosphere at 35* show in 2011. Marie Monsanto, who curated the original Whitney show, is co-curating it with me.

CC: An astounding story. Before we continue, let's take a short break. We'll return in a minute.

To be continued.

