

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 59

by Daniel Harris

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Epilogue: Part 2

CC: Welcome back to **The Author Answers**. 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

Let's discuss your relationship with Francesco Martinelli. You married Francesco in June 1977. You started a family. Life was moving along swimmingly. Francesco was selling paintings for high prices; you were writing books and working as a curator at some high profile museums and galleries. You had a position at the Guggenheim Museum. Tell us what happened between you and Francesco that caused Francesco's downward spiral.

OM: Each year we divided our time between my palazzo in Venice and our lovely home in Park Slope, Brooklyn. The boys would spend their summers with Francesco's parents on their farm in Door County, Wisconsin. Francesco was in great demand to give critiques and demonstrations at various summer art schools and festivals. I would travel with him, and we frequently gave joint presentations. We were a good team

To clarify Francesco mental state during most of our marriage, Francesco when painting was not under the influence of his disease. He was prolific and indefatigable. Once he developed his color-modulation technique, his disease was neither a release, nor a cause for him to paint. He was on track. He entered the studio each day

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committed to his art. The brutal requisites of the technique required a level of concentration and commitment that banished, or subsumed his disease.

On good days, the effulgence of a productive day's work held his disease in check. I must confess Francesco would return from his studio and dote on the boys and me. The more intensely he worked at his art, the more he lavished love on our sons and me. His love, enthusiasm and attention were the glue that bound our family together. I must confess, by example Francesco impressed on the boys the importance of respecting and honoring their mother. His love for us was boundless. Several of his shrinks pooh-poohed it as a form of mania, but when I went to Venice with our sons, he was heart sick. We would talk for hours on the telephone

But, in 1987, when I was working on my biography of Artemisia Gentileschi, I needed to spend the school year doing research in Italy. It was very difficult time for me. I missed my children and my husband. They visited during school vacations, but I began to sense that Francesco was hiding something from me. We were a very close family. Francesco was absolutely uxorious, and he adored his two sons, but I knew that something was happening to Francesco. Nothing overt, but the separations were the catalyst of Francesco's undoing.

When I returned to Brooklyn, I discovered some explicit nude paintings of a former student of Francesco's from the Art Students League. I had suffered a miscarriage two months before I returned to Brooklyn. I was emotionally distraught and my nerves were frayed. When I saw those nude paintings, like the Venetian I was, I became insanely jealous and accused Francesco, incorrectly as I later discovered, of infidelities. I was like Othello confronted with Desdemona's handkerchief. Francesco refused to move out of the house, so I took the boys and moved to Venice. That's when Francesco's bipolar condition worsened. He went into a violent manic mode.

CC: In your book, you describe the situation as becoming impossible for you and your sons. Give us a sense of what family life was like.

OM: Up to that point in our marriage, Francesco's mental health was stable. His doctors credited our marriage with keeping his bipolar illness at bay. He had not been in a dangerous manic mode for years before our marriage and during our marriage he never had a serious depression. After I left with the boys, he became manic. Francesco began to drink heavily and would get into fights. He was arrested in several bar brawls. After the third arrest, the police took him to Bellevue. [*Oriana stops speaking and is visibly upset. Taps her left forefinger on the table.*]

CC: Take your time.

Excuse me. Let me continue. It was a grey foggy morning in Venice. I had just sent the boys off to school when I received a telephone call from one of the resident psychiatrists at Bellevue. He wanted me to approve electroconvulsive therapy or ECT, commonly known as electro shock therapy, for Francesco. I refused to authorize any treatments. Instead, I immediately took the boys out of school and boarded the next plane to New York City. I had to protect my husband, even though I was furious with him.

CC: You write that when you arrived in New York, Francesco had been released from Bellevue and was living in his studio on Duane Street.

OM: Well, living there after a fashion. The Duane Street studio was not set up for living, but Francesco was camped out there. Literally he slept in a sleeping bag in a tent. I went to the studio. Francesco was a wild man. He was raving. I could do nothing to calm him. I was afraid for my life. I'm five-foot ten and physically fit, but Francesco was six-two and over 240 pounds at that time.

CC: You write that you were terrified. Did Francesco ever lay a hand on you?

OM: Never! But I was still scared to death he *might* hurt me or even kill me. I was grateful the children were not with me. But, I was desperate to find the correct treatment for Francesco. The

Francesco I saw that day was not the Francesco I married. The one thing that gave me any hope was that Francesco was faithfully meeting with his psychiatrist Dr. Jawarski once a week. I told Jawarski about my encounter with Francesco. She asked me to come in for a consultation, which I did.

CC: So, it was at that meeting with Dr. Jawarski that you discovered that Francesco was possibly out of reach.

OM: Sadly, yes, but he was still my husband. I was as concerned with the world losing a once-in-a-generation artist, as I was with saving my marriage.

CC: Tell us what you discovered when you met with Dr. Jawarski?

OM: She showed me some sketchbooks he had given her. Francesco was a brilliant sketch artist and drew all the time, but these books were different. They were street scenes, but all the people were naked and sexually aroused. Page after page of nude people buying subway tokens, reading papers, eating, standing in line, playing in the park, etc. They are an amazing record of city life, except all the people are naked. Imagine these beautiful schooled drawings that looked like adolescent sex-fantasy comic strips. That's when I knew something had flipped in Francesco's mind.

CC: Did these sketchbooks give you or Dr. Jawarski any clues, other than that Martinelli was fixated on naked, sexually aroused people?

OM: I realized that being separated from Francesco was not good for him. It ultimately led to his death. He depended on my presence for stability. As his Chinese medicine doctor told me, "Oriana, you good medicine for Mister Frank." If I had not spent the year in Italy, I might have noticed the symptoms earlier and sought better professional help. All the mental health professionals involved in Francesco's case, and there were over a dozen by the end, told me not to blame myself, Francesco was going to go off the rails no matter what. I never believed that. What I should have done, perhaps, was rather than accuse him of being unfaithful, I should have seen those paintings and drawings as symptoms of his mind going out of control. By fleeing with the children and depriving him

of the stabilizing influences in his life, he became totally unhinged and within a year he was dead.

CC: You were in a terrible predicament.

OM: Indeed. Francesco was becoming more and more difficult. He would suddenly appear at our home in Brooklyn and begin raging at the boys and me. More than once I had to call the police. He was drinking heavily and using cocaine. He was arrested for fighting several times. After six months of living with this highly volatile man, his doctors convinced me to approve electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) therapy. He had ten treatments over a period of a month. I finally called a halt to them when I could see that Francesco was not responding in a positive way. He did stop drinking and using drugs, but one morning I awoke to find a note saying that for the sake of his family he was permanently moving into his Duane Street studio.

CC: We have to take a short break now. When we come back, we will hear more from Oriana Morosini about Francesco Martinelli's death and her fight to regain her husband's art.

