

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 60

by Daniel Harris

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CC: Welcome back to **The Author Answers**. We've been talking to 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..

[Cameron turns to Oriana.]

CC: Before we continue with your husband's final days, explain Francesco Martinelli's name.

OM: Francesco was born Franklin Duncan Martin in the upstairs bedroom of his family's farmhouse in Door County, Wisconsin on June 18, 1942. His father was a fourth generation Scotsman and his mother a first generation Norwegian. When he signed on with Elaine Aster, his first gallery contract, in October 1968, she gave him the Do Business As name of Francesco Martinelli. To his pre-fame friends, he is still Frank. The boys called him Frank, but Francesco in front of non-family members. I always called him Francesco. He preferred Frank, but since he knew I preferred Francesco, he legally changed his name to Francesco Martinelli before we were married. I kept my family name. Since I was a divorced Catholic, we could not be married in a church in Venice, Italy. We were married in a civil ceremony on June 18, 1977, which was also Francesco's birthday, in Door County, Wisconsin.

CC: Explain the use of the word abattage in the title.

OM: Abattage is the killing of a member of a group to protect the group. Francesco Martinelli's death, precipitated as much by his mental illness as the endless unethical actions by his various

dealers, lawyers and gallerists; temporarily saved them all from prosecution. In fact, the year I was researching in Italy, Francesco had filed a complaint with the New York Attorney General's office against his then current dealer Alfred Cunningham, as well as Elaine Aster and two other former gallerists.

Shortly after Francesco's death, rumors began to surface that he had been murdered. The police report and coroner's autopsy confirmed suicide by asphyxia and venous congestion. There was no evidence of foul play.

You see, every dealer and gallerist Francesco used stole from him, or defrauded him in some manner. He discovered these frauds by sheer happenstance, or later when the IRS investigated their books. In Francesco's case, his dealers never served jail time, nor did the courts order them to pay restitution for the millions of dollars they stole from him.

In assembling a catalog raisonné of Francesco's paintings, we discovered more than a hundred paintings that were lost or stolen. Francesco kept a diary of all his artwork as part of his therapy, which gives us an accurate record of his output after September 1968. Fortunately, those diaries were in our Brooklyn home when Elaine Aster had all materials removed from Francesco's Duane Street studio.

The only dealer who did not defraud him was Dan Sarras, but Sarras only sold five paintings before he was incarcerated on espionage and manslaughter charges. After he was released and had discovered the whereabouts of the *Atmospheres* canvases in 1996, he was brazenly gunned down on a Brooklyn street. As you can imagine, there has been lively speculation as to who ordered Sarras's assassination.

CC: That is a pretty damning statement of the art business.

OM: Given the facts, I would say a correct statement.

CC: Tell us about the last day of Francesco's life. The way you write about it in the book it is riveting.

OM: Like many things in Francesco's life, this was a bizarre twenty-four hours. The night before he died, he stayed at our

Brooklyn home. He was cheerful and happy to be with the boys. The boys and Francesco loved baseball. Francesco took them to Prospect Park for fungo practice. We ate a civilized dinner. I thought my prayers for Francesco's return to health and normalcy had been answered. I was so relieved that I asked Francesco to share my bed that night, which he did. He was affectionate, but he did not sleep well. He woke me several times asking me questions about events in our marriage that apparently had been erased from his memory by the electro-shock treatments. Given what happened to Francesco, I don't understand how the medical profession would call such barbarity therapy.

In the morning, he made a big breakfast for all of us: waffles, ham, eggs, cinnamon rolls, a real farmers' breakfast. He walked the boys to school. He said he was going to his Duane Street studio, and I should visit him when I was through with my work at the Guggenheim Museum. We could plan something for the holiday weekend.

About two in the afternoon, I received a telephone call from Dr. Jawarski. Did I know where Francesco was? He did not come to his one o'clock appointment.

I told her Francesco told me he was going to his Duane Street studio. She said he was not answering the phone at his studio, or at our home.

I knew something was wrong. It dawned on me that there had been a major shift in Francesco's personality. The sudden return to "normalcy" was not normal, or to be expected. When I told Dr. Jawarski about the previous evening, she suspected Francesco was in a fugue state.

CC: Oriana, could you explain what a fugue state is?

OM: It's a rare psychiatric disorder characterized by temporary amnesia of personal identity, or previous life. In susceptible people, it is brought on by emotional or physical stress. Francesco suffered a fugue state in 1976 after his studio was pillaged and all the paintings there were destroyed. For six weeks, he lived as another person on Cape Cod.

CC: So what did you do?

OM: I left my office and took a taxi to his studio. It was Friday, May 25, 1990. Because everyone was trying to leave the city for Memorial Day weekend, the traffic was impossible. I left the taxi at Canal Street and ran down West Broadway to Duane Street. When I arrive at his address, the outside door was open. I ran up to his studio on the second floor. The building had been a horse stable in earlier times and Francesco's studio comprised the second and third floors of the building. There was a trap door between the second and third floors that had been used to pass fodder from the upper floor to the horses on the second floor. When I entered the lower floor, all I could see were copies of *The Nude Pianist*. He had duplicated the painting dozens of times. The entire first floor of his studio was littered with canvases of all sizes of *The Nude Pianist*. And then I saw Francesco. He was hanging by the neck from a rope through the trap door. I ran to the body; it was still warm. I began screaming and punching Francesco's body like a boxer working a body bag. According to the police, I was screaming, "I killed my husband" and "Francesco how could you do this?" over and over. I was literally out of my mind, screaming, crying and punching Francesco's body again and again.

CC: That must have been horrific.

OM: The absolute worst moments of my life. Fortunately, Jim Olhsen, a sculptor who has a studio on the first floor, heard me screaming and came to investigate. He called the police.

CC: You write that you were taken to St. Vincent's hospital.

OM: I was hysterical. I mean seriously crazy out of my mind. The medics injected me with a strong tranquilizer. I spent three days in the hospital. Two things happened while I was in the hospital. The most devastating was that Elaine Aster ordered some associates to remove everything from Francesco's studio. I later discovered they began the process shortly after the coroner's office removed Francesco's body. The beautiful thing was that our neighbors and good friends Ben and Monique Clarone took care of the boys and

even kept the news of Francesco's suicide from them, even though it was on the radio, television and in the newspapers

CC: It must have been terrible to tell your sons that their father had committed suicide.

OM: It was the most difficult thing I had to do that horrible weekend. Fortunately, one of the social workers at St. Vincent Hospital gave me good advice: Be honest, his sickness killed him, and give them truthful answers to their questions.

CC: How old were they? How did they take the news?

OM: They were twelve. They were shocked, angry, sad, felt betrayed and all the usual symptoms, but they were worried about me. The boys could tell their mother was bordering on a breakdown. They channeled their grief into taking care of me. Someone needed to be strong, so the boys took on the burden of caring for their distressed mother

CC: Tell us how you arranged the funeral.

OM: I couldn't find a Christian clergyman who would officiate or hold a service for a suicide. Finally, Rabbi Seth Markowitz, a neighbor, said he would perform a non-religious service. Fortunately, on the advice of Anatoly Gringovitch, we had purchased burial plots in Greenwood Cemetery. The whole ceremony was a blur since I was still on tranquilizers. Thank God for Monique Clarone, who stepped in and took charge of everything.

CC: When did you discover that all Martinelli's artwork had been stolen?

OM: I never wanted to go to the studio again. But I received a call from Lieutenant Claude Mulvihill, who heads up the Art Crimes division of the New York City Police Department. He asked if I had removed all Francesco's belongings from his studio. I told him, no, I was so traumatized I was afraid to enter that building. He said he would meet me at my home in an hour and drive me to the Duane Street studio. When I entered the studio, it was empty. "Broom clean" as landlords call it. I asked Lieutenant Mulvihill who removed all the artwork. He had no idea, but he said he was working on it.

CC: When did the police discover that Elaine Aster had absconded with all Francesco's art? It's rather a complex web, but you describe it so well in your book.

OM: Thank you. I'll keep it short. A wealthy Belgium art collector, Pieter Heijman, bought one of the stolen paintings from Elaine Aster in a private sale in Switzerland. That painting was later stolen from Heijman's country estate, which he reported to the police. Incredibly, there was a photograph of Francesco working in his Duane Street studio that appeared in an ad in *Art In America*. That painting, the one Heijman purchased from Elaine Aster, was leaning against the wall in the background of the photograph. Lieutenant Mulvihill had a copy of that photograph in his files. When INTERPOL posted a photo of the missing painting, Mulvihill began connecting the dots. Now he had to find Elaine Aster

CC: That took some time and considerable sleuthing

OM: It turns out Lieutenant Mulvihill is a master detective. Within six months, he infiltrated not only the Russian-Chinese underground network Elaine Aster was using, but discovered where she was living in Geneva. Of the thousands of items she had stolen from Francesco's studio, she still had most of them in a special storage facility. In the two years since Francesco's death, she had sold twenty paintings for an aggregate sum of over twelve million dollars. She was still a U.S. citizen and now had a tax problem with the IRS. Ultimately, she was found guilty of tax evasion and fined six million dollars for back taxes by the Tax Court. We also obtained from a Federal Court here in New York an order for her to return all the paintings to us. She never paid the IRS or her American lawyers who represented her in tax court. It was only after three more years of legal wrangling that we, my sons and I, took possession of the remaining artwork that Elaine Aster had in storage, nearly 10,000 pieces including more than a thousand paintings, hundreds of watercolors, sketchbooks, and dozens of sculptures and *magnettes*. Incredibly Elaine Aster, who is over seventy-five, still lives free and operates a high-end gallery in Geneva.

CC: One of the most moving places in the book is when the police hand you Francesco's suicide note. Would you read us that section?

OM: Fortunately, I've read it enough times that I don't break down anymore. [*Oriana puts on her glasses, opens the book to the correct page, politely clears her throat, and begins reading.*

"Monday morning, Memorial Day, 1990: the day nurse came into my room at St. Vincent's Hospital. She told me two police officers wished to speak with me. Detective Michael Kelly and Sergeant Sabrina Hightower asked me to relate my activities on the day of the Francesco's death. I even told them how the night before Francesco was the "old Francesco." They said they had spoken with Dr. Jawarski, who diagnosed Francesco's behavior the night before his suicide as being a fugue state.

This interview continued for about a half hour. Detective Michael Kelly, the senior officer, then produced a piece of expensive Japanese handmade paper.

—Is that the note? I asked.

—Yes ma'am, replied Detective Kelly. Are you strong enough to read it? If not, we will keep it for you until you wish to read it.

—No, I want to read it.

Detective Kelly handed me the note. Francesco had lettered it in beautiful calligraphic script. He never did anything that wasn't class.

"My brain has been seared and my brush broken.

Goodbye my lovely children"

[Oriana pauses, then continues reading.]

—You know officer Kelly, Francesco always called his paintings his children. I'm not sure if our sons, Michiko Mita, or I qualify as his lovely children.

—Well, Mrs. Martinelli, in my experience, suicide notes are directed toward the survivors, not paintings.

—My name is Oriana Morosini; I descend from a venerable Venetian family with a history of great glory and great tragedy. I never intended to contribute to the legacy of my ancestors'

tragedies. Do you know when I may leave this hospital? I must bury my husband and tell my children that their father is dead."

[Oriana slowly closes the book. The studio audience is silent.]

CC: Thank you Oriana Morosini for being our guest tonight on **The Author Answers.**

To be continued

