

The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Coda

by Daniel Harris

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October 14, 2009. Park Slope, Brooklyn

Ben Clarone sat in the front parlor of Anatoly Gringovitch's historic brownstone home in Park Slope, Brooklyn. They had just watched Oriana Morosini on the cable television show, *The Author Answers*..

—Man, what a tearjerker way to end an interview, said Ben.

—Well, said Anatoly, turning off the television, you know those shows are always theater. On almost every show, either the author or the audience ends up slobbering. That's Cameron Carter's trademark. If he makes somebody cry, he's succeeded.

—You know, said Ben, studying the Scotch in his glass, if Frank was in a fugue state, did he suicide or "commit murder"? I mean, if he thought he was someone else, if he was virtually a different person, did that person kill the painter, Francesco Martinelli?

—That's pretty outré, Ben, almost paranormal. But you raise an interesting question, said Anatoly, swirling the ice in his glass. So, have you read her book?

—Yes, but it was a long haul, said Ben. Interestingly, Oriana does not get into that topic, other than mentioning that the shrinks thought Frank was in a fugue state the last night of his life.

—If he was in a fugue state, who was he, or who did he think he was? And why would that identity or entity decide to kill the painter Francesco Martinelli?

—Jesus, Anatoly, that's one fucked up philosophical conundrum. Just like the business side of Francesco's life. Poor guy had more money stolen from him than he ever banked. Was Oriana reimbursed for the hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal expenses?

—Of course not. But remember, when the estate sells one of his paintings, they net 5-8 million dollars. Getting control of Martinelli's work was worth all that hassle and money. I'm sure Elaine Aster is seething.

—But that goes into a trust, doesn't it? asked Ben.

—Actually, Oriana had all of Francesco's assets incorporated as a foundation. So they wrote off those legal costs and saved a bundle on taxes. The foundation maintains a trust fund for Oriana and each of the two sons. Raphael, the M.I.T. math genius son, is the chairman of the foundation. I'm sure he won't let his mother starve. Besides, she's from a wealthy family. The palazzo in Venice must be worth millions.

—Speaking of those sons, did you see the designs Marcello submitted for the water park on Staten Island? Brilliant. There must be a hundred ways to have fun with and in water. He's one talented designer.

—Marcello always had an impish streak in him, said Ben. I noticed that when Monique and I babysat him and Raphael as youngsters. As fucked up as Francesco was, his sons turned out great.

—Don't ever discount Oriana's influence. Those boys would kill themselves to please their mother.

—Damn, did Oriana look great tonight or what? said Ben giving a soft wolf whistle. That woman never ages? I'll bet she doesn't weigh a pound more than the day she married Frank.

—Ben, have you ever seen her when she wasn't the best-looking woman in the room? She's one class act. If we weren't friends and I wasn't married, I'd go for her big-time.

—Since when has adultery stopped you, Anatoly?

—I may be a skirt-chaser, but friends' wives, even dead friends' wives, are out of bounds. Besides, I'm seventy-seven now. My fires are banked.

The two men sat in silence. Both men were thinking about their dead friend.

—But it still bothers me, said Ben, standing and looking over at Anatoly, how he went crazy and suicidal so fast. I mean he was always bipolar, but Oriana's explanation is too pat and unsatisfactory. Some atavistic Grendel ogre must have been torturing his crossbred Scots/Norwegian mind for years. And why did he fill all those sketchbooks with naked people? What's behind that?

—And his Duane Street studio was littered with copies of *The Nude Pianist*. I can't figure that one out, Ben.

—Beats me, said Ben. Something more than being separated from Oriana caused him to flip. And why *The Nude Pianist*? He hadn't painted in that style in over twenty years. Was he trying to connect with Michiko?

—Who the hell knows? Maybe someday someone will come up with an answer.

—Well, he was a helluva painter and a loyal friend to us. But, I've gotta call it a night. I'm giving a lecture-demonstration on the bass and contrabass clarinets at the New England Conservatory tomorrow afternoon and soloing with the student orchestra tomorrow night. I must be there by noon, and I'm driving to Boston.

—I can't believe you're still doing those crazy gigs, Ben. You've got to have more than enough money by now. Somebody offers you a handful of nickels; you'll drive all day to play the gig. Ben, you're like my dad's old Springer Spaniel, Lucky. He'd smell a shotgun, and he was off. People would park in front of our house, open the car door and presto, Lucky was over the fence and into the car. Later that day, the guy would stop by with a full game bag and Lucky. "Great field dog, you got, Mr. Gringovitch."

—Speaking of game birds, Frank was a crack shot. Whenever we went hunting, he always got the limit.

—Thankfully he didn't choose that way out, said Anatoly. It would have been too grisly.

The two men stood staring at the Persian rug on Anatoly's oak parquet floor.

—Isn't it the rule of Persian rugmakers that there's always an imperfection hidden in the rug? asked Ben. Seems I remember that from a field trip to a rug store when we were kids in grade school.

—Funny, I was thinking the same thing, said Anatoly. But, you know, what struck me is that Frank must have had some imperfection since birth that switched his bi-polar self into suicide mode. After all, he had his disease under control for over a decade after he married Oriana.

—Maybe Oriana is correct, replied Ben. The year she was in Italy, Frank's demons spewed their poison.

—That's putting a heavy burden on Oriana, Ben. If that's true, it's small wonder she continues to blame herself.

—Maybe that defect was the dark side of his third personality: the intense manic painter personality. You know, when he had that look in his eye and was oblivious to everything except his painting.

—Hmm, said Anatoly, swallowing the melted ice water in his glass. Could be. My son Zeno was talking to Marcello last week. It turns out Marcello is tight with Nick Imperiale, the movie mogul. Don't ask me how Marcello knows all these Hollywood mucky-mucks, but he does. Maybe from when he did the set designs for that Broadway play *Nighthawks*.

—So, get on with the story, man, I've got to get some shut-eye.

—Imperiale wants to make a film about SoHo in the 1970's. Francesco Martinelli will be the main character. Imperiale just purchased a film script based on Frank's life.

—He sure as hell had a more interesting and colorful life than most SoHo artists. But I wonder if they'll get it right, or just do the old Hollywood version of the bad-luck bohemian artist.

—According to Marcello, Imperiale wants it to be a psychological study of bipolar disorder.

—I find that hard to believe, said Ben. I'd hate to see Frank's art trivialized while they sensationalize his mental illness.

—Here's the kicker, Ben. Imperiale started soliciting scripts on the subject after Marcello showed him a video of the film we made for the memorial service. Imperiale was blown away when he saw the photographs of Francesco's paintings and heard your music.

—I'm not sure that's good news, said Ben. Look how many people screwed up Frank's already screwed-up life. His legacy doesn't need to include some sensationalized biopic.

—Hey, cheer up. We might score some cameo parts.

—Yeah, I can hear it now: "Hey, Ben, saw your reflection in a beer glass in the scene at the Maple Tavern in that psycho-drama on Martinelli."

—Stop being so cynical, Ben. Hell, you might get to score the film.

—Now that would tickle Frank's dry bones, said Ben, and make me a happy camper. Frank loved my music.

—I think it's great news.

—I wonder if Oriana knows?

—Probably. After Frank's suicide, Oriana and her sons became one tight family.

—Do you know Marcello loaned me Frank's last color-modulation painting? It's the last real Martinelli before he went off the tracks?

—Get outta here. Marcello loaned you a multi-million dollar painting?

—Come.

Anatoly led Ben to the second-floor library. There on the wall hung Francesco's last painting.

—Jesus! said Ben, amazing. But where did this come from?

—Probably Frank couldn't tell you. He titled it *Oriana's Love* on the back. He went off the rails after painting this. Six months later, he was gone.

—God, I remember that horrible day.

—You know, Ben, said Anatoly, Frank probably knew it was over for him. He painted this and then the sickness took over. He had to know it was time to blow out the candle.

—But how could the man who painted a picture like this, abandon all hope?

—He was crazy, Ben, but a genius.

—You know, Anatoly, I still remember visiting his studio and listening to him bang on-and-on about his theories of color and art. He was so alive and vibrant. I treasure those memories.

—You're right, Ben. Those are the best memories: Francesco in high feather. Explaining, gesturing, demonstrating in that manic perpetual-motion enthusiasm only he could summon. No one was better. I sure miss the crazy bastard. You know, Ben, the public thinks all us creative artists are crazy. For sure Frank suffered mental illness all his life, but he was not ill when he painted. And he was not wacko most of his married life.

—He's been dead eighteen years, said Ben, but we have his paintings. They are the very marrow of the Francesco Martinelli legacy.

The two men left the library and headed down the stairs. Their silent thoughts and reflections made the air seem heavy.

—Anatoly, you know what the twelve-year-old genius brother, Raphael Martinelli, told Monique and me after the memorial service, asked Ben, opening the vestibule door of the home.

—No, tell me, bro.

—He said: "Oriana (they always called their mother by her given name) told us that our father died of a disease, but he will always be remembered for his paintings. You are never finally dead until no one alive remembers you. As long as your father's paintings survive, he will be alive. You and your brother will honor the legacy of Francesco Martinelli all your lives and he will protect you with his art."

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