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Francesco Martinelli

D. R. Harris

Manhattan, 1968

Before he was Francesco Martinelli, before a gallery had taken control of his life and marketed him as the hot new Italian-American painter, before he was the painter of large surreal and phantasmagoric paintings, even before posters of his paintings filled college dorm rooms, he was Frank Martin, a graduate of Yale's School of Art. His survival skills included handyman, art mover, general factotum; his profession, mostly unpaid, was oil painting. He lived in a distressed building on Greene Street in Manhattan. Real estate cognoscenti was already marketing the neighborhood as SoHo, an acronym for South of Houston Street.

After a year as the unpaid resident caretaker of his building's failing infrastructure, Frank's landlord, Hymen Steinmetzinger, asked him to act as the building's super. In exchange, he could live there rent-free. Two other artists were squatting in the building: a husband and wife who had an art restoration business; and a dancer who lived and rehearsed his dance company on the first floor where his troupe occasionally gave performances. A claymation company rented the second floor. The fifth floor, filled with rusting thread-spooling machines, was leased by a thread company now in bankruptcy. Frank lived on the top floor under the aged, leaking roof. Being the most impacted by that frail membrane, Frank became an expert with tar, flashing, and caulk.

Frank was putting out the trash on Greene Street when a truck from Pro Piano pulled up to the building across the street. That building was more upscale than his. Some of its tenants had crafted stylish city mansions out of their spacious lofts. He watched as the piano movers lowered two grand pianos onto the sidewalk and then muscled them through the door. He recognized one of the movers as a fellow art student from his Yale School of Art days.

"Hey, Sean, since when you been humping pianos?"

"Well, sonofabitch, if it ain't Frank Martin," said Sean, a burly Irishman with a thick Boston accent. "How the hell are ya? What ya doin' on Greene Street, Frank?"

"I live here. Across the street. You moving pianos now?"

"Yeah. My girlfriend's preggers, so I needed a steady day job, except I'm schlepping pianos in and out of concert halls at all hours of the day and night. But still painting and looking forward to our show in October."

"You can have it. I did enough heavy labor growing up on a farm in Wisconsin."

"Hey, man, you look better than the last time I saw you. Depression had you by the balls."

"I'm much better now, but I was seriously whacked. Real terror, brother. Let me tell you, ice-cold hellish terror."

"Sweet Jesus, sorry to hear that. Will you have a painting ready for our group show in October? I've got a big geometric op-art canvas for the show."

"For sure, I'm working on a good one. Too bad we all have to do these side jobs. Hey, who the hell would need *two* pianos?"

"A piano virtuoso named Michiko Mita. She's moving into the top floor. When she rehearses a piano concerto, one keyboard is for the solo part and the other for the orchestra part."

“Really? A chick piano player?”

“It’s PEE-a-nist, Frank. We’re talking hoity-toidy classical music. She’s not bad on the eyes, but like most nose-pick classical music types, a serious pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, New York women,” said Frank, shaking his head.

“For sure. Look, I gotta go. Hang in there. No more nosedives into the abyss.”

“Believe it, bro! I’m happy to be taking out the garbage. Curled-up in a ball on the floor unable to move is a helluva way to go through life.”

Frank never saw the pianist move in, but a few weeks later standing in front of his building, he heard a piano moving through the parallel double octaves in the *Finale* of the Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto* at an astonishing tempo. At first, he thought it must be someone playing a recording, but he realized that there was no orchestra, only the piano. He looked up to the top floor of the building and figured the music must be coming from the pianist’s loft.

“Jesus, some fucking PEE-a-nist!”

It was one of those sudden summer microburst thunderstorms that unleash inches of rain on a small section of the City, causing flooding and mayhem. Frank, the loyal guardian of his building, was attired in swimming trunks and hip-waders, raking trash from the roof drains. The water on his flat roof was calf deep. That putrid pool was awash with urban debris: dead pigeons and rats, paper cups, beer cans, banana skins, cigarette butts, as well as sheets of newspaper and paper bags that had been lifted by updrafts onto the roof.

He returned to his loft, showered, and made a pot of coffee. He sat in his old wooden Adirondack chair, smoking, drinking coffee, and studying the painting on his main easel. It looked finished, but something was missing. This feeling was more instinctual than learned artistic knowledge.

After the rain, his loft became muggy as the late afternoon sun steamed the streets in ninety-degree heat. He opened his two working windows. He could hear a piano. Looking directly across the street, he saw the pianist sitting at one of her keyboards with her back to him. She was naked. A fan blew her long black hair toward the bass register of the piano. Frank, who listened to jazz and classical music while working, recognized that she was playing the Brahms *Handel Variations*. Her playing was muscular and precise yet nuanced by a feminine sensibility. Frank knew Clara Schumann had given the premiere. Brahms had written the *Variations* for Clara, his rumored lover. The pianist’s technique was crystal clear; the notes spoke as individually as marbles bouncing off concrete. The homophonic sections had all the richness of German brass. Frank stood watching and listening, straining to hear the music over the traffic noise. When she stopped, he watched her stand and perform stretching exercises. Then she walked away.

Frank realized he hadn’t seen her face. He remembered her broad shoulders, trim waist, narrow hips, and slim muscular arms with compact muscles and prominent tendons. Her hands navigated the keyboard with elegance and accuracy. In the quiet, intimate passages, her face almost brushed the piano’s keys. She would shake her head when her glossy mane blew onto the keys. When she reached the last variation before the fugue, she drove the music up and over the stew and pong of the city with heroic excitement. Frank had to find a way to meet this woman. But

how? He was an unknown artist recovering from a two-year depression after a messy divorce and without a gallery or dealer. He had struggled with depression since he was a teenager. A.A. considered him an alcoholic. As he listened to her play the majestic closing fugue, her uplifting performance could not keep his heart from sinking.

Frank walked to his long worktable and chose a large sketchbook. He drew a dozen quick charcoal sketches of the woman from memory, quickly capturing the generalities, but he needed finer details: The angle of a finger, a tilt of head, the shift of weight from one hip to the other, changing facial expressions. Frank needed details. Loading his old Pentax 35mm camera with a fresh roll of Tri-X, he screwed on a telephoto lens and left it on the window ledge. Next time he would shoot photos and draw sketches.

A week later, he had taken over two hundred pictures of her practicing. Only one other time was she nude, but he shot two rolls of film that day, including one roll where she faced him and performed *tai chi* exercises. She had an oval face like a Modigliani painting, shaped eyebrows, and full lips. Her expression was serene.

Frank filled two sketchbooks with drawings of ideas for his painting. He colored some with watercolors or gouache. This was no Vermeer lady at a virginal keyboard, his sketches captured a master musician commanding a five-foot grand piano keyboard.

He planned a large canvas: six feet square. The pianist would be life-size. The bottom edge would be the top of the piano bench. The pianist was leaning backward with her head facing upwards and turned to the right in a three-quarter profile. The sensuous curves of her bare back served as the central armature of the picture.

By a trick of lighting and perspective, her hands seemed to be moving. Her left hand was in mid-air and slightly out of focus as if moving at high speed. A bass key had not returned to its ready position. Her left breast was visible between her upper arm and her torso. A windowpane reflected the right side of her face, neck, and shoulders. The entire tableau was a *trompe-l'oeil*: the piano and pianist leaped off the picture plane. He would title the painting *The Nude Pianist*.

Manhattan, June, 1975

Michiko and Francesco sat at the dining room table in Michiko's upper west side apartment. They weren't married but lived together at her residence. Francesco still kept his Greene Street loft and worked there every day. When deadlines loomed, or when Michiko was performing on the road, he slept at Greene Street. When his building was sold, he lost his position as super. His space was no longer rent-free. Critically, the loft served as a refuge when his mind drowned in a paralyzing depression: a state Michiko could not tolerate nor understand.

"Francesco, I wish you would quit smoking," said Michiko, watching Francesco tamp down a pack of Camels on the back of his wrist. "I know it gives you enjoyment, but I don't like the taste of your mouth when you smoke."

"I've already given up smoking after sex because you don't like the smell of tobacco in the bedroom, and I don't smoke in the bathroom anymore."

“Well, if you can give up those times, why can’t you give up *all* times?”

“Easier said than done. You know, when I’m painting, I like to study my work and enjoy a smoke.”

“And a beer.”

“Yes, and a beer. You know, Michiko, I work hard, don’t deny a man his small pleasures.”

“Yes, yes. But I don’t like it. I want you to quit.”

“After this pack.”

Michiko took a sip of her tea. Francesco studied her face. He wondered what was going on: She was on a quit-smoking trip again. They’d lived together for seven years and had been down this road before. Francesco lit his cigarette, tilted his head back, and blew the smoke straight up.

“You’re not listening, Francesco.”

“I hear you. What about you? If I quit smoking, what’s in it for me?”

“For one, your breath and clothes will smell better. The apartment won’t smell like an ashtray, and you’ll be healthier. You should go back to cycling, or you’ll get fat.”

All she said was true, but it meant he would be a monster to live with for a few weeks. He had quit once before, gained twenty pounds, and his first wife split. She left, and he started smoking again. Quitting was a game of threes: Three hours, three days, three weeks, three months, three years. Make it to three years, and you were smoke-free.

Michiko was one of those Asian women with a beautiful face and a young girl’s figure. She had gained ten or twelve pounds since their relationship started. The upside was that her bust and hips were more feminine, but she had the beginnings of a belly.

“If I quit smoking, what personal improvement program are you going to start?”

“Do I need one?”

“I didn’t mean to imply you needed one, but if I’m making sacrifices, maybe you could do something so we can suffer together.”

“Francesco, you are some piece of work. I’m a beautiful woman, a great cook, one of the busiest concert music pianists in New York City, and I keep the house immaculate.”

“I think Katy, the maid, keeps the house immaculate.”

“Well, I hire her, and I pay her.”

“True. You also loan me money when I’m short.”

“That’s because you squander your money on supplies, alcohol and your expensive downtown studio space.” Francesco stubbed out his cigarette, annoyed at the squabble.

“I’ll bet you can stop right now. Give me the pack.”

Francesco saw that she was determined. He wished he had taken another drag. He handed her the pack.

“And the matches.”

He handed over the matches. Michiko took her teacup and poured enough tea into the cigarette pack to drown the cigarettes. She stuffed the matches into the soggy pack.

“I bet you feel better already.”

“Michiko, I just exhaled the last drag. Wait till the nicotine monkey jumps on my back. I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch to live with.”

Michiko put the soaked cigarettes on the saucer of her teacup, carried it into the kitchen where she tossed the mess into the trash.

“That’s it. Francesco, your smoking life is over. Now take a shower and brush your teeth. Use the body wash I brought from Milan. Then meet me in the bedroom.”

Michiko lay sleeping on her side, a hand resting on Francesco’s shoulder. Francesco wanted a post-sex smoke, but instead, he lay on his back studying the painting on the bedroom wall. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had painted *The Nude Pianist*. He didn’t paint in that style anymore. In the interval, he had achieved fame and money. Lately, things had gone sour with his career. He had a pending lawsuit against his dealer, Elaine Aster, who was selling his paintings out the back door and not paying him commissions. It was a mess. Elaine had cut off his monthly retainer in retaliation. Worse, she refused to show his exciting new color modulation paintings. “Too abrupt a change from your well-known style” was Elaine’s excuse. Now he had to depend on Michiko to support him during lean times. His saving would last six months, longer if he gave up his Greene Street loft.

The flickering candlelight in the bedroom animated the picture. Francesco remembered a lecture he had attended at the Metropolitan Museum on Medieval frescoes. Much of their power came from the animation of the murals by the flickering candlelight in the churches. In the candle lit bedroom, he could see Michiko move and hear the Brahms.

Manhattan, August, 1975

Frank paced the office of his shrink, Dr. Andrea Jawarski, at Bellevue Hospital. He despised the woman, and the session was idiotic. Jawarski kept telling him he had to take his lithium; he kept telling her he wouldn't.

“Why are there bars on the windows?” asked Frank, changing the subject.

“To keep the patients in and thieves out,” said Jawarski folding her hands on her desk in a deliberate manner.

“Aren't you supposed to write down what I say?”

Jawarski looked at Francesco.

“Mr. Martin, I'm the doctor; you're the patient.”

“Right, right, I almost forgot.”

“Frank, stop with the negativity, all you've said is no. All I've said is yes.”

“Sounds like the Beatles song *Hello, Goodbye*.”

“Sit down. I'll ask different questions.”

“Will you write down my answers?”

“I'll summarize them for my files and later reference.”

Frank moved the leather reclining chair so that he didn't have to look at Jawarski but could see her if he turned his head.

“Frank, how is your sex life?”

“Jesus, why would you ask that? My dick works just fine.”

“Well, do you have sex with your girlfriend, or is your sex life masturbation?”

“You're some piece of work, Dr. Jawarski. Our sex life is excellent. We have sex frequently. Almost every time we sleep together, which sometimes is not too often because she's concertizing out of town.”

“So, do you have sex with other women, or ... ?”

“Or what? And why does it matter? Leave my sex life out of this. The problem is with my head, not my cock.”

“I think you have a borderline schizoid personality disorder. We call it SPD, which sounds better than schizoid. Most non-specialists confuse schizoid with schizophrenia. Do you have many friends? Are you intimate with other people?”

“Am I buddy-buddy with other people? What's that supposed to mean? Look, I work alone at my art every day for long hours.”

“Are you close to your friends?”

“Do I hug and kiss people when I meet them? No, I don't do those things. I don't like being touched by strangers. To tell you the truth, I don't like most people. They don't live in my private world. My art comes from that world. You're trying to take that world away from me with your lithium therapy.”

“Francesco that's not a healthy way to live. We are social animals; we need the society of other humans. It balances our life. With all the solitary hours you spend in your loft, you need a community of friends.”

“Maybe *you* need that, Dr. Jawarski, but I could care less. I love Michiko and have a few artist friends. I manage just fine. You forget I'm a creative artist. I'm not an M.D., schoolteacher, or scientist. I come from a family of few words. Farmers lead mostly solitary lives.”

“Do you mean you rarely see your friends or former teachers?”

“Yes. I love solitude. When I'm manic, being with people means trouble.”

“For your emotional and mental well-being, you need to engage with people.”

“I'm perfectly happy by myself. When I'm working, Boulder, my cat is as close to another living thing as I want to be.”

“I'm not so sure that's correct. Michiko and Elaine say when you give master classes or critiques, you are entertaining, witty, and fully engaged with your audience.”

“That's a performance. They're not my friends. Michiko taught me how to separate performance from my life. I can switch into performance mode.”

“I'm sure many people who attend your classes and lectures would love to count you as a friend or acquaintance.”

“If they want to engage with me, they should buy my art. I put everything I have into my art. Look Dr. Jawarski, you received your M.D. by memorizing a lot of information. I got where I am by perfecting some simple skills and creating art from nothing. There is no way a person with your background could understand a creative person like me.”

Frank stood and began pacing the room.

“The reason you're here today, Frank, is that Michiko called and is worried that you're not painting. She told me you've been depressed for almost three months. That puts a considerable strain on her.”

“Not oil painting, right, but lots of drawings and watercolors.”

“Why not oil painting? You're a fantastic painter. Is Michiko correct, are you experiencing depression?”

“I don't think so, but your friend Elaine Aster devastated me when I discovered she was stealing from me, and then refused to sell my new canvases. Even you, Dr. Jawarski, would be depressed if New York State took your license from you. Imagine, my gallerist stealing from me? Your friend, Elaine Aster, my dealer, rejected my color-modulation series of paintings. Refuses to sell them or even display them. Christ! How insensitive are you?”

Jawarski was taken aback by this news.

“What, Elaine rejected your paintings? Tell me more about this. Did she give a reason?”

“The pictures are too different from my earlier work and too big for her clientele, or some such bullshit. That nearly killed me. Here I keep that bitch's gallery afloat with my art, and she screws me, not only by theft but now by censorship!”

“Frank, listen to me, if you had been taking your lithium, you would have been able to handle that setback. Maybe even convince Elaine how wrong she was to make that decision. You need to take your lithium. You will lose Michiko and your career if you don't balance your life. Your depressions can be pathological. Thankfully, we've managed to control your manic episodes.”

“Fuck that. Chinese medicine works. And guess what, it's organic. Lithium will end my career.”

“I can't help you if you don't follow my directions.”

“Fuck you and your prescriptions. I'm a painter, fucked up or not; my art comes from a deep place in my psyche. I don't want you fucking with the very guts of my soul. I will *not* take lithium. I can paint when I take the tinctures Dr. Wong gives me. I can't even fucking draw on lithium.”

“Frank, I'm warning you, next time you get depressed and suicidal, it's electro-shock therapy. That will probably end your career.”

“Try me. Just fucking try me.”

“That's delusional thinking, Frank.”

The Chinese doctor practiced out of an oriental medicine pharmacy on East Broadway in Chinatown. Dr. Li Wong had degrees from respected medical schools in China in both western and eastern medicines. He was taller than the typical Chinese one sees in New York City, over six feet. Thick rimless glasses framed kind alert eyes; a long stringy goatee dangled from his chin like a worn squirrel tail trophy. The skin on his face was taut and healthy. He always wore a highly starched knee-length white tunic and dark loose-fitting slacks. His wife and daughter filled prescriptions and dispensed health advice to mostly Chinese women customers. To see Dr. Wong, you needed an appointment.

Frank didn't have an appointment, but he hoped Dr. Wong would see him. Frank was confident Wong would give him better advice than what he just suffered through at Jawarski's.

“Ying/Yang out of balance,” said Wong examining Frank's open mouth. “No good.”

“What does that mean?”

“Drink alcohol. No good. Eat meat. No good. Your body, your body,” repeated Wong, searching for English words, “a cemetery of animals.”

“What, you want me to eat only grass?”

“Plants. Live like cow. Cow no have demons.”

“How do you know?”

Wong gave Frank a tight smile. He held up a vial of Frank's urine.

“This color? Not good. Healthy man. Healthy man. No color.”

“What should I do?”

“Take medicine. No meat. Fish one day by week. No alcohol. Alcohol poison.”

Frank stared at Dr. Wong. Did Wong know what he was talking about?

Wong held Frank's wrist.

"Much confusion. Your body. Bad nerves. Change diet. I give new medicine."

Frank walked through the pharmacy garnering stares from the Chinese woman shoppers. Out on East Broadway, all the craziness of the Lower East Side and Chinatown gobsmacked him. The press of humanity on the sidewalk caused him to break out in a sweat. The thought of riding a crowded rush-hour subway was too overwhelming. He began walking to his loft. He didn't want to go home and tell Michiko about his afternoon with the medical community. Maybe after a few beers, but not now.

Manhattan, January, 1976

Francesco had gathered up the remaining glasses from the previous night's party, put them in the dishwasher, took out the trash, and cleaned up as well as he could without running the vacuum cleaner. Last night's gathering was a heady mix of the city's emerging musicians and artists, their partners, and a few celebrity artists. Over forty people attended the party in the apartment, which was large, but not commodious with two grand pianos in the living room.

It was noon when Michiko came into the kitchen and put a kettle of water on the stove for tea.

"Francesco, did you come to bed last night?"

"No, I had to put Marty in a cab at five this morning. He had a seven o'clock flight to Chicago. I hope we didn't wake you."

"No, I was sound asleep. I have a concert at the Frick this afternoon at three. I will need the bathroom for the next hour. Can you make sure it's spotless?"

"I gave it a quick cleaning. Marty is a messy guy."

"He's a *slob*. I never want Marty in my apartment again. He's obnoxious, argumentative, messy, smells bad, and has no respect for women. I may be the only woman last night he didn't grope. He's an obnoxious creep. Never invite him here again."

"He was my painting teacher. I can't just cut him off."

"I don't care. This is *my* apartment. I invited *you* to live with *me* in *my* apartment. I'm the gatekeeper here. My home. My rules."

"Michiko, don't be so harsh. Some of your musician friends were unruly and obnoxious last night. You and I were grown-ups compared to some of our guests."

"Hard for me to believe you could tell. Your speech was rude and vulgar, and you drank an industrial quantity of Scotch."

"Don't be so high and mighty. You and two of your girlfriends were the only ones drinking the champagne. All six bottles were dead soldiers this morning."

"I'm sure we had help from some of your boorish friends."

Francesco had no desire to fight with Michiko. He was too groggy and could feel a bitch of a headache looming. At least he didn't smoke; otherwise, he would suffer cottonmouth and a sore throat to go with his headache.

"I'll double-check the bathroom. Do you want me to start a bath for you?"

"That would be helpful. Use the lavender bath beads."

Francesco polished the bathroom fixtures and disinfected the sink, bathtub, and toilet. While he was cleaning the floor, Michiko practiced a few passages from the music she was playing that afternoon. Francesco loved to hear her play. He was proud of her abilities and her career. She had mixed feelings about his paintings. As Michiko's Caucasian painter boyfriend, he did not impress her traditional Japanese parents. When they read that one of his paintings sold at auction for over \$50,000, they treated them to a week at their second home in Japan. He didn't tell them he only received a third of that amount.

"Francesco, please get me a cab. I'm running late. I'll meet you in front in five minutes."
 Francesco knew five minutes meant fifteen, so he put on his second-hand thick wool overcoat, heavy boots, and took the elevator to the street. The doorman was missing.

Their apartment was on West 81st, across from the American Museum of Natural History. He flagged a cab. He had just finished telling the driver it would be a few minutes for his wife to arrive when Michiko came up behind him. She wore a dark crimson suit and her full-length mink coat. Her dress shoes and music were in a small leather bag.

"There is a reception after the concert. I'll be home around seven."

"You look beautiful. How about a kiss?"

"No, you'll smear my lipstick. I'm late. I'll see you later. Get some sleep. You look awful."
 She slammed the cab door. The driver made a U-turn and headed across Central Park on 79th street.

Francesco woke when Michiko unlocked the apartment door.

"Francesco, why are all the lights off?"

"Sorry, I fell asleep on the couch. How was the concert?"

"Excellent, except I don't ever want to play with Mandy again. She is such a vainglorious bitch. She thinks she's God's gift to music."

"Didn't she win some big violin competition?"

"Yes, but there were rumors."

"Can't you two get along? You're always bickering with each other."

Michiko went into the bedroom and closed the door. Francesco waited for fifteen minutes. Sometimes after a concert, she was in a foul mood and wanted solitude. Other times she wanted ravenous sex. He couldn't tell which way things would play out. He tapped his fingers on the bedroom door.

"Come in, Francesco."

She was under the covers. She had thrown her dress and underwear over the chair at her dressing table. Candles burned next to the bed.

"Take off your clothes."

Francesco liked to satisfy Michiko before he took his full pleasure of her. Tonight, she only wanted to give him as many pleasures and stimulations as she could. For him, it was one of their best lovemaking sessions.

They lay on the bed. He pulled the covers over them.

"Francesco, I have something to tell you."

"Good news or bad?"

Francesco lay watching *The Nude Pianist* move in the flickering candle light wondering what was up.

“I want you to move out.”

It was as if a professional boxer had punched him in the solar plexus. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head. Michiko moved an inch away, so they were not touching.

“Is there some reason for this? Did I hurt you? Is there another man?”

“I don’t want to discuss it. When I’m ready to talk to you about it, I’ll call you. I’m leaving Tuesday for Cleveland and will return Sunday night. You must move all your things out before I return. Leave your key with the super.”

“Can you tell me why? Don’t I at least deserve that?”

“Maybe in a few weeks. I don’t want to speak about it.”

“Should I leave now?”

“A guest is coming for dinner. He’s the cellist who played the Beethoven trio with us this afternoon. I must get dressed and prepare dinner. Please leave your painting of me playing the piano.”

“Is that my legacy?”

Michiko didn’t answer.

“Please don’t destroy it.”

“Never.”

Francesco left the bed and dressed. He stumbled around like a drunk, stuffing a backpack with toiletries and clothes. He felt the vise of depression on his head. His stomach burned. He closed and locked the apartment door, and took the elevator to the lobby. When he arrived, the doorman was talking to a man with a cello case. He was a tall, handsome man who spoke with a heavy Israeli accent.

“Armando,” said Francesco to the doorman, “I’m going away for a few days. I’ll be back on Thursday.”

“Hello,” said the man with the cello, “I’m Mikel Haddad. Michiko invited me for dinner tonight.”

“Yes, I know,” said Francesco. “Unfortunately, I have another engagement. I’m sorry.”

Francesco took the local C train to Columbus Circle, where he changed to a Coney Island Express. He exited at Broadway-Lafayette. He walked down Broadway. He turned onto Prince Street where the slush on the narrow sidewalks was beginning to freeze. He walked in the street.

The neighborhood was changing. Artists who had moved into the abandoned buildings ten years ago were now being priced out. The area was on the verge of becoming chic, and real estate marketers were calling it SoHo. Once this neighborhood became fashionable, none of them would be able to afford to live and work here.

He entered Fanelli Cafe, his neighborhood bar, ordered a shot and a beer, bought a pack of Camels, tapped down the pack, and lit his first cigarette in over six months. It tasted wonderful and gave him a slight buzz. Without Michiko’s money, he would lose his loft and be homeless and studioless, exactly where he was ten years ago when he arrived in Manhattan from Yale. He would have to paint his way out of this mess. For now, he would enjoy his smoke and his beer. “Fucking Michiko. Fucking Elaine Aster!”

Venice, Italy, 1978

The hips of the woman lying next to him hid the rising sun. She was on her side, facing him with both her hands tucked between her thighs. Her breathing had a slight purr to it as she slept. Her lustrous auburn hair covered her shoulders and breasts.

It had rained during the night, and he had pulled the curtains back to open the French doors and listen to the October rain. Today was his last day in Venice. It was also the woman's birthday. He would have to rise and pack to begin the journey back to New York City. They had celebrated her birthday last night and spent most of the night entwined.

The Venice Biennale had been a smashing success. His color modulation paintings were the talk of the art world. He'd sold all his pictures for high prices and had orders for more.

The dawn light grazed the top of Oriana's hip, backlighting the subtle small contours in her flesh. If he squinted his eyes, crepuscular rays formed from the light passing through small slats of the shutters. The pale light dappled the white flesh of her hip with small burnished pools of slowly changing pastel pinks, blues, and greens.

"What are you thinking, Francesco?" Oriana was now awake and studying Francesco's face.

"Nothing. I was enjoying the dawn light on your hip and thinking how much it is like my color modulation paintings."

"But you painted those paintings before you saw the light on my hip."

"No, but you have given me a eureka moment. I'm going to start painting even bigger pictures with more detail — huge pictures the size of the Tintoretto's in the Accademia. Whole universes of modulating and interacting colors; paintings that will explode color modulation to the limits. I'm going to call them *Atmospheres*. Finally, I have the money and the space to paint big. *Grazie mille*, Oriana for having such a colorful hip."

He turned his head and looked into her eyes. They were shining with delight and excitement.

"You have such big eyes," said Francesco turning on his side to face her directly. "And the whites are so white and clear."

"Your black eyes are so intense. I always think you can see through my clothes into my soul."

"Well, it's easy now — you're nude."

"Nude? Not naked?"

"Oriana, your nude body makes a statement. Naked is for difficult truths or bare bodies. Nude is arty and delicious."

He wanted to make love to her one last time, but he was afraid she would make a scene afterward, begging him to take her with him to New York.

"When do you leave for the plane?"

"After lunch. I have a lunch date with your boss."

"May I accompany you?"

He didn't answer. Oriana had broken down last night at dinner and again when they were lying in bed listening to the rain on the canal.

"You're not answering me."

He had said those very words to Michiko more than a year ago.

Manhattan, 1977

They were sitting in Shun Lee West on 65th street. Michiko wore a stunning turquoise sheath dress that flattered her figure and flesh tones. Her waist-length black hair was piled high on her head. She was in high feather. Her most recent solo recital received rave reviews and she landed a new recording contract.

“Would you care for a cocktail?” asked the waiter, a middle-aged Asian man.

“I’ll have a double Glenlivet,” said Francesco. “Michiko?”

“A glass of the house Chardonnay for me.”

He knew she would not drink the wine. She would drink champagne because her mother had said that if her drunken uncle had stuck with champagne, he would never have become an alcoholic. He would have gone broke first. Her father and mother never drank. Like many Asians, they were allergic to alcohol.

“Michiko, wouldn’t you prefer champagne? My treat.”

Michiko consulted the wine list.

“Bring me a split of the Dom Pérignon.”

“Very well, Madame, a double Glenlivet and a split of Dom Pérignon.”

Michiko took her napkin, carefully unfolded it, and placed it on her lap.

“I wish you would dress more appropriately.”

“I don’t make as much money as you do. I had to give up my SoHo loft. I’ve moved to Red Hook, Brooklyn.”

“Is Elaine Aster still your dealer and paying you a monthly retainer?”

“She cut my monthly stipend after I sued her for cheating me out of commissions.”

“You see, I told you that woman was a crook. But, no you didn’t believe me. How could me, a Jap pianist, know anything about the New York art world? You were a fool to believe that those women, Elaine Aster, and that shyster lawyer, Angelique Brody, were on your side. They were there to rip you off. I told you that seven years ago. Francesco you are a crazy naïve idiot.

“Stop, Michiko. You were right and I was a fool. But now I don’t make much money. Elaine has a few smaller old paintings in her gallery to sell, but nothing new.”

“But I read that Christie’s sold one of your paintings at auction last month for sixty thousand dollars.”

“Yes, but as you know, I didn’t see any of that money. It was a resale.”

The waiter brought their drinks. He opened the split with great ceremony and filled Michiko’s glass.

“Thank you,” said Michiko with a tight smile.

They sat quietly for some time.

“Isn’t that Barbara Walters at the table over there?” said Michiko.

“It probably is. ABC is around the corner.”

Francesco looked at Michiko, and his heart broke. He was still in love with her. When she wore her hair up like that, she was regal. She told him it was like a crown; it gave her power.

“You look fantastic, Michiko.”

“Don’t try to romance me, Francesco.”

“I’m not. You are one beautiful woman and an amazing talent. I heard your solo recital at the Metropolitan Museum last month.”

“Why didn’t you congratulate me afterward?”

“I was afraid I would upset you. The Ives *Concord Sonata* was astounding.”

“Francesco, that’s what I mean about you. One minute you are the finest man I could want. The next minute, you are so insecure and depressed. I don’t want to be near you. What’s wrong with you?”

“As you know, my ex-wife said the same thing. She said I was a bipolar-schizoid-drunk. When I quit smoking, she left me. When I quit smoking, you kicked me out.”

“Well, are you smoking now?”

“Of course.”

The waiter took their order. Michiko chose the menu with authority. Since she was an Asian music celebrity, the staff was attentive and solicitous. It also meant that he would have to control his emotions. A raised voice could be a scandal for Michiko.

“You always choose the best dishes.”

“I eat here often, and they know I will return a dish to the kitchen if it is not perfect. My choices are their best plates. I hope you appreciate what you have been missing.”

“I haven’t eaten a good meal since you kicked me out.”

They sat looking at each other.

“Francesco don’t look at me like that. And why are you so thin?”

“I have been working hard, and I don’t have a lot of money for food. Without the monthly stipend from the gallery, it’s tough to buy materials, food, even beer and cigarettes. So far this year, Elaine sold two small paintings and I made twenty etchings for a book of poetry.”

“You will enjoy this meal.”

He could feel himself sliding into depression.

“So why did you kick me out? Because I quit smoking or because I have mood swings.” Michiko swirled the champagne in her glass, touched it to her lips, and then returned it to the table without tasting the champagne.

“You know I love your paintings, especially the big abstracts. They are so musical. The one that was in the living room, *Big Wave*, was especially rhythmic.”

“I sold it for chump change. I was broke.”

Michiko looked around the room. She could sense the miasma of depression enveloping Francesco.

“Michiko, you’re not answering me. Why did you kick me out?”

“I have to use the ladies’ room. Excuse me please.”

“Of course.”

The wait staff stood off to the side with the meal. They were waiting for Michiko to return. The service captain spoke into the ear of the waiter. The staff removed the plates.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” said the service captain, “but your companion has taken ill and left the restaurant.”

Venice, Italy 1978

Francesco turned on his back and stared at the moldings on the ceiling. He lay there, counting the roses in the ornate plaster around the chandelier.

How could he take Oriana to New York City? She didn’t have enough pedigree to land a job at one of the prominent museums, galleries, or auction houses. No college would take her on the faculty with her Italian degrees and limited English. Venice was an anachronism; New York was in-your-face commerce and wealth. When he was down on his luck and had applied for a job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he lost out to Caroline Kennedy. Family and money are

requirements in those lofty realms. He lived in a cold-water loft in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He slept on the floor in a sleeping bag on a futon he found on the streets of nearby Park Slope. Oriana's home was a palazzo. His was an abandoned propeller repair shop that had been a sail loft in the age of sail.

"I should make some coffee," she said.

"That would be wonderful. Or do you want me to do it?"

"No, I need to clean up. I'll put the coffee on. Listen for it."

When he heard the stovetop espresso pot espress, he rose and went into the kitchen. He turned off the flame. He could hear Oriana singing in the bathroom. He walked into the shower and took her into his arms.

They sat on the bed, wrapped in bath sheets drinking their coffee. Oriana's hair was piled high on her head wrapped in a towel.

"Oriana, you know how I feel about you, but I can't see you living in my hovel. Yours is a beautiful home. My home is a dirty, abandoned factory in Brooklyn with no hot water and no heat."

"But you've sold all those paintings, and there will be many more commissions. There is a future. What are you saying? Is this your dark side?"

"Practical side, hardly morbid. How can I ask a beautiful, cultured, smart woman like you to share my life in an ugly, violent slum?"

"Francesco, I *believe* in you. We will find better lodgings. You are going to be famous. You already are. Wait until you return to New York, people will be clamoring for your work. Everything will work out. I want to share your success with you. Find us a good home in New York."

He tried to picture her in twenty-five years. But then in twenty-five years, he would be sixty, if the wild dogs of his depression didn't slip their leash. What would Michiko think when she saw Oriana with all her European sophistication, cultured hauteur, and vivaciousness? What would Oriana think when she heard the raw emotional power of Michiko's performances? The contrast was daunting. He should keep to his solitary life. But how tantalizing a life with Oriana would be! She didn't have a mean bone in her body, but could he trust his future to her? Michiko was history. How long would it take Oriana to leave?

"Francesco, love me one more time, *lentamente*," she said, pulling off the bath sheet and lying back on the bed.

Red Hook, Brooklyn, 1978

When he entered his loft, he noticed the answering machine tape was full. After he had unpacked, he dutifully played back the tape and took notes in his tattered Moleskine notebook. Most of the messages were congratulatory, a few were potential sales, and one was from his landlord asking for rent. The last message was from Michiko.

"Francesco. I'm sorry about last time, but I just didn't want to talk about our relationship. I saw the picture of you with the gorgeous *Italiana* in the Arts section of the *Times*. Call me."

It was six in the evening. He walked to Carroll Gardens and ate at a local Italian restaurant. Compared to Venice, the food was dreadful. Compared to American Italian restaurant fare, it was cuisine. When he returned to his loft, there was a message on his machine.

“Francesco, why are you not answering your phone? Are you with that Japanese *musica*? Call me as soon as you receive this message. Kisses, Francesco. *Te amo. Ciao, ciao.*”
 Francesco looked at his watch. It was eight at night, two in the morning in Venice. He found his address book and dialed Oriana. She answered on the first ring.

“Francesco?”

“Yes, Oriana. How are you?”

“Missing you”

“Me, too. It’s four degrees Celsius here. You would be sneezing and freezing.”

“But, *you* would keep me warm.”

“All I have is a smelly sleeping bag and a few old sweaters. This time of the year, I wear a knit watch cap. When it’s freezing, I sleep in my overcoat.”

“Now, I worry about you.”

“Don’t. I’ve survived almost two years here. I haven’t died yet, and I’ve made some of my best paintings here.”

“It is warm in my bed, and I miss you.”

“Well, don’t go Dido on me and throw the bed into a Venice canal. We will need it when I visit.”

“Francesco, are you really going to visit me?”

“Of course, of course, my dear. For me, it was a long, sad flight to New York from Venice.”

“I love you, Francesco.”

“I love you, too, but I have to hang up.”

He pressed the switch hook and ended the call. Oriana was a problem, but so desirable. Tomorrow he would call Michiko, probably not.

He put on his warm knit cap, removed his shoes, jeans, and shirt before crawling into his sleeping bag. He could hear the rats scurrying in the walls. He lit a Camel and lay smoking in the dark. The horns and whistles in the harbor were a poetic counterpoint to the drone of traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

A black wing flapped in the periphery of his vision. When he closed his eyes, he saw the Venetian sun dappling colors on Oriana’s hip. He could paint his future.
