

Five Million Yen: Chapter 1

by Daniel Harris

Tokyo To New York City

October 19-23, 1976

The DC-9 bounced in the turbulence over the north Pacific waking the dozing Ben Clarone. His six-foot-three frame was crammed in a middle seat between the window and the aisle. His contrabass clarinet case leaned seat-belted in the window seat. He was the only American passenger on a Japanese charter flight from Tokyo to New York's JFK airport via Seattle. The plane's movement in the turbulence became violent. Passengers and cabin crew were ordered to their seats. Overhead luggage compartments sprung open. A few passengers screamed. Ben Clarone noticed a change in pitch of the engines. To him it seemed they were working harder, but he sensed the plane was traveling slower.

A male voice made an announcement in Japanese. Ben couldn't understand a word that was said. The Japanese passengers tightened their seat belts as a tense quiet enveloped the cabin. The only sounds were the creaking of the airplane as it bumped its way across the Gulf of Alaska. The young woman occupying the aisle seat next to him was airsick and inconspicuously vomiting into a bag. Ben cinched the seatbelt tighter around his contrabass. Looking out the window, he noticed that there was black smoke streaming from the outboard starboard engine. Not a good thing to see hundreds of miles from the nearest land.

Jesus Christ, thought Ben. Crashing into the icy and storm-tossed Gulf of Alaska is a hell of a way to end a three-month global music tour.

The slow progress of the plane heightened the tension in the cabin. By now, most of the passengers believed their death imminent. The longer the flight took, the greater the tension and fear in the cabin. Ben asked the one stewardess who spoke some English what happened. She told him they were diverting to Anchorage, Alaska because of a mechanical problem.

Their landing at Anchorage International was routine except for the fire trucks spraying foam on the smoking engine. The passengers were herded into the transit lounge, that dungeon where you are in no man's land. You can't enter the country on whose land you are standing, and you are not progressing toward your destination. This transit lounge had one bathroom for each sex and no food or beverage services. The plane was towed to a hanger for repair. Ben tried to clear United States immigration but was told that he would need to have his luggage with him, which was impossible because the charter company couldn't afford to have the plane's luggage unloaded and reloaded.

Two hundred fifty angry, hungry, stinking and sleepy passengers boarded the same plane early Saturday morning for Seattle. The flight, which had begun in Tokyo Tuesday night, arrived in Seattle as dawn broke. The charter company abandoned the passengers and their luggage in Seattle with no explanation. The Japanese passengers were accommodated by JAL. Not being part of the Japanese tour group, Ben had to fend for himself.

The customs officials in Seattle took no pity on Ben's predicament. They badgered him with questions about his itinerary. They searched his musical instrument cases and his backpack for drugs. They examined the visas and stamps on his passport.

When Ben arrived at JFK he had fifty dollars American and a check for five million yen in his wallet. He'd left Tokyo with over a thousand dollars American. After purchasing airfare for himself and the contrabass clarinet from Seattle to New York his financial situation was desperate. The trip also took a toll on him. His face, normally handsome and clean-shaven, was dark with a five-day beard. His red-rimmed eyes had a thousand-yard stare as he pushed

a full luggage trolley through the terminal. By the time he joined the taxi queue, the line snaked around the corner of the terminal. He was in no hurry to arrive at his apartment in Manhattan, but he needed a good shower and to sleep in his own bed for the first time in three months.

The original tour itinerary called for a month of concerts in Europe; then ten days free, followed by a tour of South America; then to Australia and the Far East. He thought it wise while he was in Frankfurt to call home and update his actress wife, Zoë Bontemps, that the tour plans had changed and he would not be coming home for the week between tours as originally planned. The new itinerary deleted the break and added concerts in Istanbul, Cairo, then Madrid followed by Buenos Aires, Lima, and Rio, then on to Africa, India, Australia and the Far East. Making international calls from a pay phone in 1976 could be difficult to impossible depending on the country. He knew their marriage was going through a rocky stretch. He didn't want Zoë to have grounds for complaint.

—What the fuck time do you think it is, motherfucker? said an irate and drunk male voice.

Ben assumed he had reached his home telephone number in New York City. He guessed he was mistaken. Then he could hear Zoë's sleepy voice.

—Stop, I'll talk to him, she said to the cursing man.

It was obvious. The marriage was over.

—Where are you headed? asked the taxi dispatcher.

—West 71st Street in Manhattan.

—This cab is yours, said the dispatcher. Are those musical instruments?

—Yeah. I've been on tour for the last three months.

—No wonder those cases look so beat-up.

After paying the cab fare, he was down to twenty-two dollars. It was Saturday, October 23, 1976, ten-thirty on a rainy Saturday night in New York City.

Ben traveled with a backpack, contrabass clarinet, a bass clarinet, soprano saxophone, and a soprano clarinet. Their apartment was on the sixth floor of a six-floor walk-up. When he arrived at the apartment, he noticed a different lock and a Mezuzah on the door jam.

Rather than knock, he went to the first floor and rapped on the Super's door. After a few minutes, the Super responded.

—Who is it?

—Ben, Ben Clarone.

When the Super opened the door, a cumulus cloud of marijuana smoke floated from the apartment. Manny, the Super was dressed in a dirty guayabera and boxer shorts.

—Ben! Hey mang, were you been, mang?

—On the road.

—Yo dude, your ole lady split six weeks ago. You don't live here no more.

—Say that again.

—Ben, mang, yo bitch split on you. Dig it?

—You mean I don't have a place here anymore?

—Sure as shit, amigo.

Ben's mind began working in doubletime. He needed a safe place to stash his musical instruments. Ben couldn't leave them with the super, Manny would hock them in a New York minute.

—Hey, Manny, can I use your phone?

—Yo, mang.

Ben entered the apartment. Manny's daughter Rita, dressed in a halter-top and short shorts, was sucking on a large hookah.

—You know my daughter Rita?

—Of course. Hi, Rita.

Last Ben knew she was up in Harlem turning tricks for a black pimp.

—Where you calling?

—A recording studio down the avenue.

—Keep it short, brother.

Ben hoped that Bright Star recording studio was open. He would leave his horns there and then maybe find someone who would let him crash at their crib.

When he was about to hang up, Jimmy, the night tech, answered the phone. Ben explained his predicament. Jimmy said no problem, but he was leaving Bright Star in half an hour.

—Wait for me, said Ben. I must have a safe place for my horns.

Jimmy said he'd wait.

It was raining again. Cabs were full. Ben began walking with his horns and backpack down Eleventh Ave. The eyes of the local street hoods watched him closely. Schlepping all those horns in the rain, Ben guessed they thought he was too crazy to mess with. It took him twenty-five minutes to walk to Bright Star on West 54th Street.

Jimmy was waiting.

—Hey Ben, what's happening? I was ready to set the alarm.

—Thanks for waiting. My old lady didn't pay the rent while I was on the road and I don't have a home or even a place to crash. I've got to park the horns and look for a crash pad for tonight. Know anyone who might have a couch or floor for me?

—Not off-hand. You know you don't smell so good.

—Dude, I've been stuck on an airplane or in an airport for the last five fucking days. How do you think I should smell?

—Sorry man, just thought I'd let you know. There's a flop up on Broadway around 100th Street where some of the traveling guys stay. There's also that place down the street from your old crib on Rivington street.

Neither option sounded good to Ben. He didn't know what to do. He had only twenty-two dollars. Banks were closed until Monday. His options were limited.

—Jimmy, could you spot me a twenty?

—I would man, but I'm all tapped out. I bought my brother and his wife dinner.

—Do you know the name of the place on Broadway?

—Something like Broadway Studios, Artist Studios. I'm not sure.

—Do you know how much they charge?

—No, but it's cheap. Good thing you're leaving your horns here. I hear it's a rough place.

—Thanks, man. You're the best.

Ben shouldered his pack and headed east toward Broadway. His security was the five million yen check in his wallet. He'd have almost sixteen grand by next week. The Japanese promoters had picked up all the *per diem*, so he rarely spent any money. Of course, the brutal schedule didn't allow much time for shopping. His incentive to spoil Zoë had been snuffed out two months ago in Frankfurt. What he needed was a shower and some quality sleep.

In the spitting rain of a three-day nor'easter, the New York night held few promises.

To be continued.

