

Five Million Yen: Chapter 10

by Daniel Harris

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Ben watched the cat burglar snake his way from window ledge to window ledge.

-Hey officer!

Ben's cuffed hands were locked to a security bar on the back of the front seat. He couldn't tap on the window of the car.

-Officer!

The patrolman decided to ignore him, or couldn't hear him.

Ben watched the cat man, probably Victor, who, for sure, had Ben's check and ID's in his pocket, reach a fire escape and make his way down and out of Ben's line-of-sight.

Jesus, these cops are stupid. Looks like Victor will be on 104th street when he gets to the bottom of the fire escape. Aren't half the precinct's cops there?

-Officer! Ben yelled at the top of his voice.

The patrolman glanced in his direction.

-Shut-up punk, or I'll rap you a few good ones with my nightstick.

Ben looked at the sidewalk. The pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk didn't seem to change with all the police presence. Mothers and nannies with strollers, old people, students, street people, suits, all acted as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening

Suddenly a photographer with two Nikons appeared at the side of the police car. He started snapping shots of Ben in cuffs in the back of the car. Ben ducked his head.

Shit! I hope that's not a press guy. I can see it now. *Cops Nab Zoë's Hubby.*

A few more photographers arrived and formed a small scrum outside the car. All madly snapping pictures. The patrolman chased them off.

Ben looked out across Broadway. Coming down Broadway on the other side of the street was a guy who looked like a waiter in a tux going to work. He had the tux jacket over his arm and wore green high tops and walked with a certain feline confidence. The green high tops didn't fit.

That has to be Victor the cat burglar. I'm sure he has my check and ID's. He's probably wearing my tux, too.

-Officer. That guy in the tux. That's the murderer. Get him!
The patrolman rapped his nightstick on the window.
-Shut up punk!

Ben watched Victor disappear into the 103rd Street station. He was just another anonymous Puerto Rican waiter going to his restaurant job.

-Damn!

Ben sat back in the seat. At least the jerk patrolman was keeping the paparazzi away. It was a good hour before Mulvihill and Smith returned.

-You still here, punk?

Mulvihill, opened the back door. He brusquely took the cuffs off Ben. Ben got out of the car and was standing by the trunk.

-Here's your pack. Don't come back to this neighborhood.

-Mulvihill's right, Clarone, take the big hike. You are *persona non grata* here.

-But I saw the murderer walk right down Broadway. Just now!

Mulvihill looked at him with all the scorn he could muster.

-The perp was long gone before we got here, Clarone.

Smith took Ben's arm and turned him away from Mulvihill and toward the subway entrance.

-Take a train and don't come back to this neighborhood. I want you to call me every morning. Here's my card.

-But you guys don't understand.

Mulvihill, pushed him towards the subway.

-Get moving and stay out of the upper west side.

The two of them got in the car and drove off with their siren whooping and Mars lights flashing.

Ben shouldered his pack and headed toward 103rd Street. An uptown 104 bus, with Zoë's picture on the side, belched heavy black diesel exhaust as it pulled away from the curb. Ben choked on the black spew.

Bus or subway thought Ben? Subway. Got to get to Brooklyn. It's already two in the afternoon.

At least he had some money. If I can find Gringovitch, I might have a place to stay; and maybe, just maybe, he has connections that can get my money back. Russian thugs should be able to out muscle a couple of small potato hoods.

Ben stood on the East side of Broadway waiting to cross over to the West side to get a downtown train. A black 1965 Chevy Impala pulled up.

-Get in.

It was Reynard.

Ben got in.

-What's up? I was told you didn't exist.

-Those detectives know I exist, but they don't know that I exist in many guises. I am the paragon of the **exist**tential man. He chuckled at his pun. Ben grinned.

-You know, Clarone, you saved your life because you did what I told you.

-I'm grateful, but you know Rita told me to get out fast and even helped me.

-Unfortunately, David Seltzer is dead and it looks like Rita Alivera is almost dead. Fighting to stay alive after being nearly beaten to death and having a junk monkey on your back is not conducive to a long happy life. The hospital doctors didn't realize she was a junkie until she was in serious shock. With all those needle tracks, you think they would know.

Ben thought about Rita's father's new woes. What did Black people say?

"He got the wearies." For sure he had more than the blues.

-Where are we going?

-Depends on where you want to go.

-I'd like to stop by Bright Star and get one of my instruments. I stashed all my horns from the tour there.

Reynard cut back to Broadway and headed downtown. When he got to fifty-third he went west and then up to fifty-fourth on Tenth Avenue and then right to Bright Star. Ben started to get out of the car.

-If you get in trouble, or hear anything about our friends, call me. Here's a number. Just leave a message. It's a pay phone and a drunken sounding man will answer.

Tell him Mr. Green needs to talk to him. Leave a number. If you have to move, call again later and leave a number. This time, say you are Mr. Brown. If you have to call a third time, you are Mr. White. A fourth time, Mr. Black. If you are in Brooklyn, you are Mr. Kings. And, Clarone, use a pay phone. Good luck and fly low.

-Thanks.

Reynard gunned it down the street, the passenger door slamming shut by the force of the acceleration.

Ben rang the doorbell and was buzzed into the studio reception area.

-Sabrina!

She was showing off her perfect breasts to good advantage. Ben always wanted to nuzzle those orbs, but Sabrina was off limits to musicians.

-Ben! Welcome back to the USA. Jimmy told us you left some horns here. You must be in fat city with Zoë being a TV star.

-Not quite.

Sabrina managed to get another half-inch more cleavage showing

-I don't want to disturb anyone, but do you think I can get one of my horns?

-Let me page Jimmy.

She pushed some numbers on her little switchboard.

-He should be here soon. You know Ed Sandman is in studio A. He might need a sax man to lay in some overdubs for the new *Chain* album. Do you want me to tell his assistant you are in the building?

-I'm, well, a little...pressed. But...sure why not.

Jimmy came down the corridor where all the gold and platinum record plaques were displayed in perfect rows. Ben once watched a general assistant spend almost an hour hanging one of those trophies.

-Hey, Ben. Saw your name in the *Daily News*. A couple of cops came by and asked me if I saw you on Saturday night. I told them yes. I hope that's not a problem.

-No man. You did the right thing.

Ben started waking back down the hall with Jimmy.

-Listen I need my soprano sax..

-Well, you know Ed Sandman saw your horns and was hoping you might be available for a few overdubs. They are having a lot of trouble with the new *Chain* album.

-I don't have all my saxophones, just the soprano. Zoë hocked them all.

-I'm sure you can get a loaner from Sal or from Manny's. You're big in this town.

-Yeah! Tell the cops that.

A dude with hair down to his butt came out of the Studio A's control room.

-Are you Ben Clarone?

-You're talking to him.

-Ed Sandman was wondering if you could come in and lay down some horn lines.

-Most of my saxes are in hock. All I have are clarinets, a flute and piccolo and a soprano sax. One of the clarinets is a contrabass. The others are a bass and a soprano.

-Let me see what he says.

The guy went back into Studio A. Ben could hear some rough, but strange music when the door was open.

-Ed asks if you can be ready in about a half hour. He wants to try soprano sax and bass clarinet.

-Ask him if he can give me some cash afterwards. I'm broke.

-No problem.

Yeah, how many times had he heard "no problem" and there was nothing but big problems?

Jimmy led him down a hallway.

-There's a vocal booth in Studio C you can use to warm-up. If you need some weed, they have a ton in Studio A.

-No weed, but I could use a drink. Weed makes my mouth too dry.
-Tommy, the chief, keeps a bottle of single malt Scotch in the shop. I'll get you a good hit.

Jimmy went to get the Scotch.

Ben went into Studio C. Unpacked his soprano sax and bass clarinet. He started warming up on the soprano and then switched to the bass.

These windfall gigs could be lucrative or a total bust.

The Scotch that Jimmy gave him was smooth. That Tommy was a typical pain-in-the-ass chief engineer, but he knew his Scotch. Tommy was famous for telling wire guys when they were making cables, "You can't cut it longer." Tommy was a pisser.

Long hair came into Studio C and asked Ben to follow him into Studio A's control room.

He was greeted by lots of high fives, palm slaps, hey bros, and hey man's.

-Saw your bitch on the train, she's all over town.

-Saw her uptown alone in a car full of brothers. (Much laughter)

-Maybe she was lookin' for some big black fire hose. (More laughter.)

Ed Sandman came up to him.

-I hear you are wanted for murder one. Clarone. I'll bet it's the first time a murder suspect has been in a studio doing overdubs. Put that on your resume.

-I always loved your wit, Ed.

-I'm just pullin' your chain. Get it?

-Yeah, you're the head *Chain*.

Dope makes people dopey, Ben observed for the eleventy-two-hundredth time in his life.

-What's shakin' and what're you looking for me to do?

-Galen, play that second track back for Ben.

Galen was a big guy, with what they call in the industry "big ears" and a totally unflappable demeanor. He could give you the pitch of a flea fart a hundred yards away and *solfege* anything you put in front of him. Say anything bad about the Giants, Rangers, Knicks or the

Yankees, he would make you suffer all night. But he was the best. He could turn *drek* into gold.

-Hear that, I think we need a soaring horn part here, not too many notes. And here. Play from the D-flat ninth chord Galen, we need some rude social commentary on the lyrics. Like growling and split notes.

-I think I hear where you're headed.

-OK. Let's lay down some takes.

Ben went in the studio and put on the headphones. The assistant put the mic where Ben told him the bell of the soprano would be. He played a few notes.

Galen asked him to give him his loudest notes. Galen twiddled some knobs on the Neve console.

-Put the piano, the vocal, the drum and me in the cans. Nothing else, and turn my cans down a *skosh*.

-OK.

-How's that?

-Perfect.

-Take 1.

Ben laid down a few tracks, but was not coming up with anything good for the "rude social commentary." He asked for a break.

-Ed, do you mind if I get my contrabass clarinet and see if I can lay in some juicy stuff?

-OK. Five minutes.

Ben took the contrabass clarinet out of its case. He took another hit on the Scotch, wet the contra reed and went back into Studio A.

-Jesus! What in God's name is that thing?

-A contrabass clarinet.

Ben played a few ripe notes.

A big smile came over Ed's face.

-I love it already. Has all the panache of breaking wind, without the ordure.

Ben left Bright Star at seven that night. He had partaken whiskey, food, a few good tokes, a snort and added four hundred dollars to his purse.

He walked up to Ninth Avenue and flagged down a cab.

-I want to go to Third Street and Seventh Avenue in Park Slope Brooklyn.

-I'm not going there.

-The law says you have to take me there.

-I'm not going there.

-OK. Take me to the Waverly Theater at West Fourth and Sixth Avenue.

To be continued.

