

Five Million Yen: Chapter 11

by Daniel Harris

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Ben boarded the Brooklyn bound F train at West Fourth Street. No one looked happy on the train. The train car was full and Ben had to stand. A Rasta was standing next to him with a big cart that held folding tables, boxes of essential oils and Rasta literature. At first it was the best smelling thing on the train, but it began to get in his craw.

-Hey, man. You smell this stuff all day?

-You got a problem?

-No, just wondering.

At Delancy Street, a slew of Hasidim got on the train.

-Hey, mister, take your pack off your back. You take up too much room.

-Easy, friend.

Ben put his pack between his legs with the soprano sax. The guy reeked. Ben was stuck between sweet essences and rancid Talmudic funk. It was going to be a long trip.

When the train left the Carroll Street Brooklyn station, it started the long climb up the bridge over the Gowanus canal, the most polluted waterway in North America. Ben looked out at the Statue of Liberty. The last time he saw Lady Liberty, it was from the air two days ago on Saturday night.

He exited the train at Seventh Avenue, walked towards the back of the train and left the station. At the top of the stairs was Smiling Pizza. Diagonally across the street was Jack's Park Slope Tavern. Ben went into Smiling Pizza and ordered two slices to go.

A souped-up red Camero pulled up in front of Smiling. A young Italian kid with a pompadour haircut, heavy gold chains, open shirt and pointy-toed Cuban-heeled shoes got out of the Camero. He looked like something out of Central Casting for Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, *circa* 1955. He left the engine growling and a Botticelli Venus babe in the front seat. As he headed toward the door of Smiling, he stopped to comb his hair.

At the counter he shouted his order to the counterman.

-Give me a whole pie: pepperoni, mushrooms, peppers, onions, olives and anchovies. And I don't have a lot of time to wait.

-Look buddy, dis is Brooklyn. Yuse want a salad on your pizza? Yuse go to Queens.

-I don't believe you.

-Yuse believe it.

The Italian stallion and his gold chains got back in the Camero slamming the car door and laid a thirty-foot double strip of rubber on Seventh Avenue.

Ben lifted his slices and drained the oil off into the trash pail by the counter. He put dried hot pepper, garlic powder and oregano on his slices, and put them back in the bag. He walked across the street to Jack's Park Slope Tavern.

Ben pulled the door open to Jack's and entered what seemed like a museum diorama of Old Brooklyn from about the 1940's. It could have been Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks at the Diner*, except it was a bar. There were six people in the place including the bartender. The four men sitting at the bar were frozen in time. They barely moved. Each of these men had a shot glass, a stubby can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, and an ashtray in front of them. They all smoked unfiltered cigarettes. For the longest time the only movement was the smoke rising from their cigarettes. There was no music and no one talked. The TV had a Ranger game on with no sound. No one watched the TV. They stared straight ahead, or at their drinks. One man had his head on the bar. Each man had some physical deformity, either from industrial accident or war. All of these bar mannequins had ashen gray complexions and the posture of

someone waiting for Godot. The scene could have been a Klaus Oldenburg sculpture.

The bar ran down one side of the narrow room. There were four tables on the opposite wall. There was a door on the Ninth Street side and one on the Seventh Avenue side. The Seventh Avenue entrance had three steps. The Ninth Street entrance was at sidewalk level.

The bartender was even thinner than his slim customers. Unlike his patrons, he was in slow, but constant motion. He made as much noise as rising cigarette smoke as he moved back and forth behind the bar. He also was smoking and as a testament to his steady motion, a cigarette's worth of ash remained attached to the cigarette dangling from the left corner of his mouth. The left side of his face was three shades darker than the right side from nicotine staining. His left eye was mostly closed against the smoke.

-How much for a beer?

-Small draft, ten cents. Large, fifteen. Bar shots, twenty cents.

Gotta love Brooklyn, Ben said to himself.

-Give me a large beer and a shot.

-Comin' up.

The bartender brought his drinks. Ben paid and took them to his table.

The pizza was excellent. The draft beer tasted like Bon Ami.

There was one other person sitting at a table. He was a big guy with a huge head and a nose to match. He was the only person, beside Ben, who had any flesh on his frame.

Big head got up and ordered a stubby and a shot. As he walked by Ben's table on his way back to his seat he stopped.

-You a musician?

-Yeah. Just got in from Tokyo.

-I'm a filmmaker and produce a small jazz festival in Prospect Park in the summer.

-My name's Ben. Ben Clarone.

-I'm Gabriel. Gabriel Benjamin. Call me Gabe.

Gabe's face lit up.

-Hey, we're almost CBGB. Ben Clarone and Gabe Benjamin.

Another word game guy like Reynard, thought Ben. Must be some Ramones fan.

-Have a seat.

-Let me get my stuff.

Gabe retrieved a notebook and a backpack and sat down opposite Ben.

-So, what kind of music do you play.

-Mostly weird new music. My group plays the fastest free jazz in the world.

-Free Jazz. Is that your style or the pay?

-Good one.

-You heard about the Polish jazz musician? He went into it for the money.

-Heard that one and lived it.

Both men took a sip of their beers.

-Didn't I read your name in the *Daily News* today?

-Maybe. It's old news by now.

-What brings you to Park Slope? I didn't know Park Slope was outlaw territory.

-I'm looking for a friend. He lives on Third Street near Seventh Avenue.

-That's just up the street. You're at Ninth Street. Third Street is six blocks north.

-Are you the Ben Clarone who is married to Zoë Bontemps?

-I think "was", is the correct tense.

-So, what's it like being married to a hot number like Zoë Bontemps?

-About the same as living with any other woman: Periods, crying jags, fights, treachery, good times and bad, sex and no sex. It's the whole *mishegoss*.

-Must drive you nuts seeing her picture on all the subways and busses.

-Not so much. What's funny is she vowed never to do TV. Only theater. We both wanted to be purists. The TV gig was the final axe that split us.

-Not TV. Money. Hey, money changes people. My life changed when I made a ton of bucks working for Robert Altman on *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. New wife. New son. New everything. Unfortunately, the first wife and the two other boys are sucking my wallet dry.

They sipped their beers.

-Here's a shot to gelt and guilt.

-To gelt, screw gilt.

They knocked back the cheap bar pour.

-Yuck! They said in unison.

Ben washed down his shot

-I remember my father calling a shot and a beer a boilermaker.

-Wonder where that came from?

-I don't know, he grew up in Brooklyn.

Ben started to get up.

-Listen, I have to see if I can find my friend. Sorry, but I should keep movin'.

-Not a problem. There's a smoke shop on the corner of Third Street. They probably can tell you where your friend lives.

-Thanks, Gabriel.

-Call me Gabe. I rent the second and third floors over the grocery store at the corner of Eleventh Street and Seventh Avenue. My office is on three. Ring my office, if you need anything. You're in Brooklyn, Greatest City in the world.

-Thanks, I'll remember that.

-By the way, don't buy the draft beer here, order the PBR stubbies. Same price.

-Thanks, I'll remember that.

Ben hoisted his pack, and grabbing his soprano saxophone headed up Seventh Avenue. Ben was to learn that Gabe had an encyclopedic knowledge of New York City and most of the world. He knew exactly what to order and where to go to buy or do anything.

When he arrived at Third Street. There was a sign over a corner storefront that read: **Brooklyn Cigar Company**. It was still open. He entered the store. There was one customer who was talking with the proprietor.

-Can I help you?

-I don't know. I'm looking for a painter who lives in this area. His name is Anatoly Gringovitch.

-Everyone knows the 'Vitch. He's a legend.

-I've known him since our Chicago days, but I don't know his Brooklyn address.

The proprietor walked towards the front door of the store.

He pointed down Third Street.

-His house is five or six white-stones down Third Street on the left.

-Paul do you know the number?

-No, but I can take him there.

-That would be great. I'm Ben. Ben Clarone.

-I'm Paul Austerlitz, P.I.

-What's a P.I?

-Private investigator.

(Why is this shit happening to me, thought Ben.)

-You're not part of the NYPD are you?

-No, I do personal investigations.

-Like divorces?

-Sometimes.

-Can you show me Gringovitch's house?

-Sure.

Paul and Ben left the store and headed down Third Street.

-Are you the guy who is married to Zoë Bontemps?

(Was this guy looking for business, thought Ben.)

-I think "was", is more appropriate.

-I see that a lot in my line of work. Relationships can be like a city of glass.

-I bet.

-Well, this is the 'Vitch's house. Doesn't look like anyone is home. I know he's in town because he bought some cigars at the store about an hour ago and was dressed in his painting clothes.

-I'll just wait on the stoop.

Paul walked back up the street.

Ben decided to try the doorbell. He gave it a good long ring. Nothing.

Ben sat down on the stoop and listened to night descend on Brooklyn.

To be continued.

