

Five Million Yen: Chapter 12

by Daniel Harris

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Third Street Brooklyn is a wider street than all the others in this part of Brownstone Brooklyn. From Fifth Avenue up the hill to Prospect Park, hence the name of the neighborhood, Park Slope, it was a potential grand boulevard. Since the construction of the park after the Civil War, it became a special luxurious wide street with white stone and brownstone houses with front yards, an amenity not possible on the other narrower streets of Park Slope. The wide avenue on Park Slope side of Prospect Park was named Prospect Park West, but everyone referred to it as PPW. Of course Union Street and Ninth Street were also wide, but they were main arteries that led to other more familiar parts of Brooklyn or covered a subway line

Gringovitch's house was the only unlit dwelling on Third Street that evening. It was a white stone four story home with a stoop and a front yard that was home to weeds and two abstract sculptures. They were quarter sized *maquettes* of Gringovitch's entries in a short lived project for an Anti-Viet Nam War Memorial. Their multi-hued ceramic coatings glowed in the fading twilight. These orphans of a successful movement, but failed project, were a powerful tribute to the thousands who were clubbed, tear gassed, jailed and hounded by their government.

Ben sat on the stoop and watched a parade of pedestrians: dog walkers, strolling couples, bustling homebound workers, restaurant deliverymen, and drug mules. Many musicians passed by with guitars and horns in gig bags on their way to who-knows-what

pittiful gigs. Occasionally, a passerby would wave or voice a greeting. There was a real sense of community, something that was missing from his former Manhattan neighborhood.

Seems like a nice place, Ben thought. He didn't know much about the neighborhood except that the Battle of Brooklyn was fought within its boundaries during the Revolutionary War. It was also a neighborhood that became developed from farmland after the Brooklyn Bridge was opened in 1883. All these gracious brownstone houses were built as homes for prosperous Wall Street and professional types in the late Nineteenth Century. Now most of those homes were cut up into as many rental units as the owners could squeeze into them. Most of the apartments were rent regulated in some manner, and all the tall apartment buildings along PPW and Plaza Street were rent regulated. With so much cheap housing, it was not surprising Ben saw so many musicians on the street. There were also probably artists and young whatever-wannabes living in this cheap housing warren.

Ben had been sitting there an hour or so, when he heard the big voice of Gringovitch:

-What peripatetic horn-toot is gracing my stoop at ten o'clock on a Monday night?

-Hey, bro! About time you came home, you old hell-rake.

Ben stood up and went down to the sidewalk. Gringovitch embraced him in a giant Russian bear hug.

-And what brings the ace hornswoggle to the faded glory of Park Slope? Murder? Unfaithful beautiful wife? Thirst? Crash pad?

-A little of everything, you rascal.

-Have you ever been to my Brooklyn house?

-No, only the atelier in Paris.

-Let me show you my humble Brooklyn abode. Francesca and the boys are in Rome in my new studio, so we can drink and act like fools all we want. Have you eaten?

-I had a couple of Smiling Pizza slices and a beer at Jack's.

-I hope you had a bottle or can of beer. You'll be on the commode all night if you drank their draft beer.

-I drank the draft. I was warned by a guy named Gabe, that it was not a good idea and to order the stubbies, but it was too late.

-Too late indeed. I'll put extra toilet paper in the third floor bathroom.

Gringovitch unlocked two locks on the front door leaving a third untouched and flipped on a light.

-Gabe Benjamin, he's a good guy. Listen to him. Come in.

Gringovitch turned to Ben:

-If you lock the door, never touch the top lock. Lock and unlock the middle and bottom locks. It's a security thing against lock picking burglars.

He took Ben's sax and pack and put them in the parlor room. It could have been a Russian Paris Salon in the 1920's. Three huge Gringovitch abstract paintings graced the walls. The largest samovar Ben ever saw sat on a low ebony-and-marble table in front of a sofa that had to be twelve feet long. Overstuffed side chairs were tastefully scattered around the room. What looked like a two meter Beckstein grand piano filled the bay window.

Ben went over to the piano and played a few scales and the beginning of Debussy's *Golliwog Cakewalk*.

-For an old fart that only uses brushes or welding torches, this is an amazing piano.

-It belongs to Francesca. Rumor has it that her father took it as payment for smuggling about twenty Jews out of Venice to Palestine during World War II. According to family lore, he was a major league international smuggler and opportunistic gangster. A regular World War II Rhett Butler. I think there is a plaque with his name and deeds, or something, in Israel.

-The plaque probably says "Frankly, dear, I don't give a damn."

-Good one.

-Well, it's a fantastic piano and I'm no pianist.

-I think they made these bay windows for grand pianos. When this house was built, there were few record players. Playing the piano was home entertainment.

Ben sat down on what looked like a very expensive side chair.

-So, Slava, (Gingovitch's familiar name), you know I need a place to crash.

-You can stay here as long as you need. But, are you running from the law?

-No. Actually an undercover cop drove me part way here. But, I do have a big problem. I have no ID. Nothing except what you see. Zoë hocked all the instruments for more than I can redeem them. She abandoned our crib, and all my stuff in the crib, on 71st street. I'm basically homeless and without an identity, except of course in the newspapers. All my ID's and a check for five million yen, were stolen from me at the flop up on 103rd street Saturday night. There will probably be a picture of me on the cover of the Daily News tomorrow morning in handcuffs in the back of a police car.

-Nothing like free publicity.

Slava went over to the marble fireplace mantle and took a black Balkan Sabranie cigarette out of a 1920's-style humidior.

-Want one?

-No thanks. It took me three years to give up cigarettes; I'm not about to start again.

-That's my good old stubborn Ben. Smoke a lid of dope, but eschew a good tobacco cigarette. They're not your typical American addictive smokes.

-I'm not testing my will.

-Suit yourself.

Gringovitch lit the cigarette and took a deep long drag, almost as if he were smoking good hashish. He held it and then expelled the smoke in one long continuous narrow stream.

-Good stuff, Ben. Sure you don't want one?

-I'm sure. But I'll take a beer or something to drink. It's been a tough three months.

-I have some grappa that Francesca's uncle makes. It is not rough like most grappa, but smooth like good whisky. It removes all edges, freezes the tongue and erases the memory.

-Sure.

Gringovitch went to the kitchen and came back with two small grappa glasses and a cork-stoppered olive oil bottle filled with a clear liquid. He poured the grappa into the two glasses, and gave one to Ben.

-Zdorovie!

-Zdorovie!

-Oh, yeah, baby. This is amazing.

A smooth fire dissolved in Ben's mouth.

-Man, it's good to see you Slava.

-Likewise Ben. Too bad you're in deep dudu.

-Well, the NYPD doesn't think I committed the murders, but they still want me to keep in touch.

-Murders?

-Ya, the night desk clerk was wacked today. I think that guy, Victor, Big Stinger's cohort, killed him and left with my five million dollar check and all my ID's from the safe. He's a cat burglar, and I saw him walking from window ledge to window ledge when I was hand-cuffed in the police car.

-That's the best news I've heard.

-You call that good news.

-Well it's easy to get a check stopped and another cut, but being held for murder one for two murders is a tough nut.

-Well, the cops know I didn't do the second murder since I was in their custody when it happened. They told me to keep in touch. Call detective Smith every morning.

-Is that Herrold Smith?

-Yes. Do you know him?

-He's famous for finding art thieves and forgers.

-Why is he on my case?

-That is an interesting question. Does he know you know me? Does he have your address book? Did you mention my name?

-No. Nothing. I think my address book was in the hotel safe unbeknownst to the cops. If anything, big Stinger or Victor have my address book.

-Did the police tell you to stay in town?

-No.

-Good. I may have a job for you.

-But I need to get my passport, driver's license, bank ID and a check for five million yen.

Gringovitch took another sip of the grappa and a long drag on his cigarette. He gave Ben a long deep stare.

-There's a guy stopping by later tonight, Dan Arris. He needs some help with a project.

-Well I need to get my ID's and check back from some petty thugs.

-We may be able to find the solution to all your problems tonight.

To be continued.

