

Five Million Yen: Chapter 13

by Daniel Harris

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Gringovitch stood up and motioned to Ben.

-Before we get too comfortable, let me show you where you'll be sleeping.

Gringovitch collected Ben's pack and saxophone and started up a thickly carpeted staircase. Ben followed along, more than a little bleary from the grappa and fatigue.

When they arrived at the third floor, there were three bedrooms and a bathroom.

-The two boys sleep over there in those two rooms. You can sleep in this room. That's the bathroom. You're gonna' like the shower. There is enough pressure to knock down children. It's great for blasting cobwebs from hungover heads.

There are towels and toiletries in this closet. If you need clothes, you can probably fit in Sylvester's clothes. He's my oldest son. I don't cook, but there is plenty of food in the kitchen. Or, you can go to the Greek place around the corner on Seventh Avenue. If you need some coin, I can spot you some.

-No I'm good. I played a gig this afternoon and have about half a note.

-I hope you mean \$500.

-You got it. Just checking on your hipness quotient.

-Before it gets too late, I have to make some calls. Take a shower and then come downstairs and meet Dan Arris. I think you might be interested in his project.

-Sounds like a plan.

-OK. See you in twenty or so.

Ben went into the bedroom and unpacked. He undressed and went into the bathroom. Slava was correct about the shower. Ben luxuriated under the heavy flow. It was his first real shower in three months. That last shower in the flop was OK, but not like this. There were Italian and Swiss soaps and shampoos. Ben took advantage of both

When he finished his shower and dried off, he put on clean clothes. The shower and cleansing had cleared his mind and freshened his body. The fatigue of three months on the road still gnawed at him like a tune you can't get out of your head, but he thought he could handle whatever Slava had planned. Homecoming was not what he had envisioned. Thank you, Zoë.

He went down to the first floor. He could hear Slava talking on the phone. He was speaking in Russian and then would switch to French or Italian. Ben admired these Euros for their language skills. What did his friend Giovanni Lezardino say to him in Hungary one time when we lost our hotel reservation?

-Ben, I am European man. I speak all languages. You are foolish Yankee. You only speak American, not even English.

Still, Lez loved it when Ben spoke in jazz hipster slang. Lez was one of his best friends and perhaps the greatest vibraphone player in the world. No tink, tink with the Lez. He could make that instrument sing, cry, growl, and weep. He was a master and what's more, a great friend.

Ben went into the living room and poured himself another grappa. He went to the piano and tried to play *Epistrophy* exactly like Monk. This Beckstein piano practically played itself.

The doorbell rang.

Slava was still on the phone, so Ben went and answered it.

-Hello, I'm Gringovitch. Is Slava home?

Ben was really confused.

-This *is* the home of Gringovitch. Who are you?

-Who are *you*?

- I'm Ben, but some people call me Gringovitch.
- Well, some people call me Dan Arris.
- Funny. The police think I'm Dan Arris.
- What are you, some kinda wise guy?
- Who the Hell are *you*? Some imposter?
- No, I'm Dan Arris.
- Well, I could pass for Dan Arris, but I'm also Gringovitch.
- I'm here to see Anatoly. Is he here? This *is* his house.
- Let me check.

Ben went into the room across from the living room, a den that served as Slava's office.

- Guy here who says he's Dan Arris.

Gringovitch covered the telephone receiver.

- Let him in for Christ sake.

Ben went back to the front door. He couldn't see anyone. He went outside and suddenly, an arm went around his neck from behind, and a gun barrel went to his head.

- OK wise ass. Is the big guy here or not?
- Easy. I was just playing with you. Slava is waiting.
- That's more like it. He released Ben and holstered his gun under his leather jacket.

Arris was familiar with the house; he looked in the den and saw Gringovitch on the phone and turned into the parlor, went up to the humidor and took out a cigarette.

- You want one?
- No thanks, I don't smoke.
- Could be the only smart thing you do.

Dan Arris sat down on the long sofa and smoked his cigarette. He didn't smoke like Slava, but in the nervous American fashion. He gave Ben a close look.

- So what's your relationship to Anatoly?

Ben looked at Dan Arris, trying to figure the motive for his question.

- He and I go back to our school days in Chicago. His family was Soviet escapees; and my mother, a precinct captain in Chicago, got

his father a job with the city. His mother spoke good English and Polish, so my mother got *her* a job in the school system. Anatoly and I were in the same junior high school and high school. We both took art classes at the Chicago Art Institute when we were in high school. We're like brothers. What's your relationship to Slava?

-We do business together.

-Covers a multitude of sins.

-What are you, some wise guy?

-Easy dude. I just know my man. Slava suggested you and I might have some business interests in common.

-I'm not sure I want to do business with some jerk musician.

-Suit yourself. I'm in the enviable position of being no one, nowhere, with no present, except for a very visible ex-wife.

-Who's that?

-Zoë Bontemps.

-Jesus, you're that poor bastard?

-You're lookin' at him.

-What's sex like with some chick like that?

-They are all about the same. The sex part only lasts a few minutes; the girl part takes the rest of the time. Actresses are always bitchy with each other and it carries over to their husbands.

-At least you got your ins and outs with her, so to speak.

Ben looked at the humidor and was thinking it was time for a cigarette.

Gringovitch walked into the parlor.

-So, I see you two are hashing out a few things.

-This guy, Ben, was telling me about how you grew up together.

-Oh, yeah, we go way back. I would trust him with my life, like he now trusts me with his life.

-He seems like a green chump.

-That's not always a bad thing; especially since the Ben I know is a tough smart guy, Gringovitch said, picking out a cigarette from the humidor.

-Seems like a naïf to me. Well, we have business to discuss. Is the music man in on this, or do we send him to bed?

-I think Ben might fit in perfectly.

-OK. Let's go up to your studio and look at the product.

Gringovitch motioned for Ben to follow him upstairs with Dan Arris. They ascended to the top floor. Gringovitch turned on the lights. They were bright daylight spots that flooded the studio space.

Ben could see that during the day, north light from the skylight and the windows filled the studio. A perfect painter's studio, as only Slava would build.

On three easels were three identical paintings. Ben thought they looked like three copies of a late Arshile Gorky painting. The complex tracteries of black lines were exactly copied.

Gringovitch pointed to the middle easel.

-This is Arshile Gorky's 1948 painting *Unfaithful Wife*. Gorky suspected his friend and fellow painter, Roberto Matta, of having an affair with his wife, Mougouch. In fact Matta was diddling Gorky's wife. It was one of the many contributing factors that caused Gorky to hang himself on July 21st 1948. Most likely, Matta took the painting from Gorky's studio between Gorky's death and the cataloging and storing of Gorky's unsold works. Because it was missing when the inventory of his paintings was taken, it is not listed in the catalog of extant Gorky paintings. Gorky never overcame the horror of holding his mother in his arms as she died of starvation, and his own subsequent narrow escape from the Armenian Genocide as a teenager. He was a classic paranoid.

About ten years ago someone in Matta's family circle stole this painting from Matta's Italian home. The theft was an act of revenge for Matta's philandering by one of his many girlfriends. I took it as five years' rent payment for my small rue Charenton studio in Paris.

-Is that the studio I stayed at in Paris two years ago?

-The very one, Ben.

Slava pointed to the painting on the center easel.

-This is Gorky's. The paintings to the left and right are copies. Forgeries really, since they are not studies, but exacting copies of all the materials, as well as, the picture itself.

-To a horn player with only a little art training, they all look the same to me.

Arris threw Ben a condescending look.

-Obviously, Clarone, you don't know jack about the high art of forgery.

-I'm a musician. I stand up and play and the music goes out in the air and is lost forever, to paraphrase Eric Dolphy.

-In case you forgot, painters make a physical product.

-Easy, Dan, Gringovitch cautioned. This is not a business for hotheads.

-Ben, you are looking at an original and two copies. They are virtually identical. But, if you take a magnifying glass, you will see that the painting on the left, near the lower-left corner, has one very small, almost microscopic brush stroke that starts from the left and goes to the right. Likewise the painting on the right, in the right-hand corner, there is an equally small brush stroke that goes from right to left. In the original, those same places have no apparent brush strokes. The craft of the forger is to not make the copy too perfect. After all, some day you may be asked to identify the original.

-Pretty slick.

-Only if you have a buyer. We intend to sell one of the forgeries and have INTERPOL 'find' the other forgery. We will tell the buyer our plan so the police will not be looking for any lost Gorky paintings. We have an Armenian multi-millionaire who is interested in the original for \$250,000. The first buyer is in for \$50,000.

-All sounds a little dicey to me. Ben gave the men an incredulous look.

Gringovitch gave a grin and opined,

-The desire to possess has no bounds, my friend. If you decide to be a partner to all this, your role will net you much more than your missing five million yen.

Ben sat with his head in his hands. Did he want to get involved in a criminal scheme, especially when he had to telephone the NYPD every morning? Worse, the detective he had to call was the NYPD's

chief art fraud man Detective-Inspector Harold Smith. Since he now knew about the scheme, hothead Arris might just decided to whack him if he didn't join the plan. Even more disconcerting, if the plan failed he would be suspected of treachery. He was snared.

-Look, I'm not sure what role you have for me. I'm a musician with no proof of identity *and* with his mug splashed on tomorrow's front page of the New York City tabloids.

Arris stood up and looked Ben squarely in the eyes. Ben had never been looked at with such intensity. He didn't flinch.

-This game has no place for rats or wimps. Either you're with us or you are in big trouble.

Gringovitch walked over to Ben and put his hands on shoulders.

-You will do nothing illegal. You are a red herring. It will be a week, ten days at most, out of your life. What do you have to lose? You've already lost your wife, your ID's, your instruments, your home and all your money. You will be someone else for a short time. Pretend you are playing your life in a new key. Remember, Vostanik Manuk Adoyan lost everything, came to America, and became Arshile Gorky for the rest of his life.

To be continued.

