

Five Million Yen: Chapter 14

by Daniel Harris

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Detective-Investigator Harold Smith tossed the large interoffice envelope on his desk, took off his coat and sat down. His face hurt. The prosthetic nose was pinching his cheek and the melanoma was acting up under his left eye. With six kids and a long-suffering wife, he should have been home for dinner, but he was stuck with these murder cases in the Artist Studios SRO. It was not even his detail. Due to a corruption sweep there was now a shortage of experienced detectives in the NYPD, so he was pulling double duty. His primary role was senior detective for art theft and fraud, but now he was handing a low-life murder case.

Someone had torn off a Teletype from INTERPOL updating the Registry of Stolen and Missing Art. A 17th century Mathieu Van der Schmitt painting, *Die Kartenspieler* was stolen in the last forty-eight hours from a private collection in Linz, Austria. At least it wasn't a Cezanne card player from the Barnes Collection. If it were a Barnes theft, he would be on call.

He emptied the envelope onto his desk. There was a typewritten inventory list:

- Hess Gasoline Credit Card issued to Benjamin Clarone
- Sinclair Gasoline credit card issued to Benjamin Clarone
- New York State Driver's License issued to Benjamin Franklyn Clarone
- Macy's Credit Card issued to Benjamin Clarone and Zoë Bontemps

- Musicians Union Membership Card: Local 802, A.F. of M., ALF-CIO, Associated Musicians of Greater New York, Clarone, Benjamin: Paid through 12/31/1976.
- Social Security Card issued to Benjamin Franklyn Clarone
- Four Baggage claim tickets: Northwest Flight FL182 SEA-JFK
- US Passport E2115432 issued to Benjamin Franklyn Clarone, expires June 17, 1978
- One photograph of nude woman: Zoë Bontemps, spouse
- One US Bicentennial "Spirit of '76" 13 cent stamp

Smith put everything back in the envelope. He slipped out of his shoes and put his feet on his desk. Why would someone murder a harmless old man for this stuff?

The desk clerk on duty at the SRO, Simon Sketis, was clutching the wallet and passport in his left hand under his body, as if he were hiding or shielding it from his attacker. Sketis was using his right hand to defend himself. The attacker must have also wanted these, but was interrupted and fled without taking them. Did the attacker take anything else, and if so what? And, was it something of Clarone's or some other guest? Whoever killed Sketis was not only brutal, but wanted something in the safe.

Clarone mentioned he was carrying a check for five million Yen. That is what's missing, and that must be what the murderer was after, and what he stole. But why? There was almost a zero chance anyone could cash or deposit a check that big made out to Benjamin Clarone from *Bunkacho*, the Japanese Ministry of Culture, who couldn't prove themselves to be Benjamin Clarone. Only some big international financial person, or international gangster type had the connections to pull that off. Even then it was risky. Eventually Clarone, or his bank, would contact the Japanese bank and they would stop the check and either issue another, or initiate a wire transfer.

Why did Clarone have a check made out, rather than have a wire transfer? Smith thought about that. If Clarone's only checking account was a joint account with Zoë Bontemps, then he wouldn't

want her to have access to the money, especially if they had become estranged while he was away on tour.

At this point in time, Clarone has no valid ID. He can't identify himself to the bank. He has no address, so he can't get a bank account. He is one lost dude.

Smith picked up the phone on his desk and called Ben Clarone's service.

-Musicians' Service. How may I help you?

-What are your hours for accepting packages for your clients?

-Secure registered drop-off is only available from eight in the morning until eight at night. Small items in addressed and sealed envelopes or flats, such as scores and parts, can be put in our drop box inside the 49th Street entrance. They will be delivered to the addressee's internal lock box before eight in the morning.

-Thank you. Smith hung up.

Clarone is going to need these. Let me call the DA's office and see if I can get them released.

Harold dialed the inside number to the DA that was assigned to the case.

-Biteman?

-Speaking.

-Harold Smith here.

-Hello Harold. Did your guys pick up that desk clerk, Rodney Stickins, for questioning?

-Not that I've heard. Mulvihill stopped by his last known residence and he hasn't been there in two days. He hasn't come to work at the SRO either. We've got Vice looking for LeRoy "Big Stinger" Burr. He's usually out punching his girls most nights.

-Harold, I suppose you heard that Rita Olivera died a few hours ago.

-No. That's too bad. Now we have a triple murder. Probably all committed by the same person or persons.

-I heard her father went ballistic in the ICU. Took three security guys to subdue him. It might be useful to put a tail on him. You know

Latin machismo and revenge; he might lead us to the killer of his daughter.

-Possibly. Say, I've got that musician Clarone's passport and contents of his wallet in my office. Is there any reason to not return them to him?

-You know better than that Smith. They were found on Sketis's person. They are State's evidence. Possible motive.

-Too bad, I was hoping to help the bloke out. You know his wife is Zoë Bontemps.

-Is that true? Poor bastard.

-He was on world tour and she split on him. He's basically homeless with no ID.

-There are a lot of guys would pay cash money to be in his position.

-Biteman, do you mean homeless and no ID, or married to Zoë Bontemps for three years?

-Both. Biteman gave a loud chortle.

-By the way, Smith, I can fill out a document that says Clarone's passport; DL and SS card have been taken as evidence. He can use this document to get a new passport, DL and Social Security Card. If he goes to Passport Office, he can get a replacement passport tomorrow. Ditto the DL. The SS card could take a while. He can cancel the credit cards and get replacements. I would hope 802 would issue him a new card.

-How soon can you have that document?

-I can do it right now before I leave for the night.

-Great. Messenger it up to my temporary office at Midtown North, 306 West 54th Street. I'll drop it at Clarone's service tomorrow morning.

-I know you Smith. I'm sure you are setting a trap.

-Biteman, you read too many mystery novels. Clarone will thank you and I do too. Have a good night

Almost as soon as Smith put his phone down it rang.

-Manly here.

-Ah, my faithful Rasta brother. What's new?

-I was on the F train with your man Clarone this evening. He exited at Seventh Avenue in Park Slope.

-Thanks brother.

Manly hung up.

A musician always has an address book, or date book and address book combo. I wonder where Clarone's is? I should stop by the SRO and have another look in the safe. Smith made a mental note to check with evidence again.

Smith thought about Ben's destination. There are a lot of musicians in Park Slope. He's probably crashing with some musician friend. Hopefully the *Daily News* will put Clarone's picture in the paper tomorrow. If so, I will find out where he is camped from my street eyes.

* * *

Dan Arris left Gringovitch's house about midnight. Ben and Anatoly went into the parlor.

Anatoly proffered the grappa bottle.

-A nightcap Ben?

-Sure, why not.

Anatoly filled two glasses and offered a toast:

-To business!

-To business.

-So Slava, what time tomorrow do you get up?

-Well, Ben, I have a little studio work to do upstairs so I probably won't get up before ten or eleven.

-I have to call Detective Smith tomorrow morning. I should also call my service and see if there are any gigs. I also need to find out if Zoë, or her lawyer, has contacted me. That could be real interesting.

-Don't forget Ben, you are meeting Dan Arris at Fanelli's on Prince Street at one for lunch. If you leave before I am up, or want to go out for breakfast, there are sets of keys on a peg rack in the kitchen. But Ben, remember, you don't touch the top lock. If you

unlock the bottom two locks and the door won't open, that means someone has tried to get in.

-What do I do?

-Go up to the cigar store on the corner and tell the owner, Augie, that Anatoly broke the seal on the last box of cigars and they were compromised. He will give you a credit slip with a telephone number on it. Find a private pay phone and call that number. I'll answer and tell you what to do. If that ratfink Austerlitz is hanging around, just buy something and leave. Go back later when Austerlitz is not there.

-Sounds like some spy novel.

-Well, there are a lot of snoops and snitches around this neighborhood. There are also a lot of thieves who think they can pick any lock and make off with a haul. Once, I drove up to discover that a couple of spaced out junkies had backed a truck up to my front door and were trying to pick the front door locks. A couple of shots into the air and they split like kangaroos. Had to call Ryder to have them come and get their truck. 78th precinct didn't do anything.

-But it seems like a good neighborhood.

-For the most part, yes, but there are enough criminal elements, so keep your guard up. All these homes were built as single-family houses. Now only a small percentage is single-family homes. Most have been carved up into micro-box apartments without the knowledge of the building department. There are about twice as many people living in Park Slope than the census bureau counted.

-It must have been a grand place back in the day.

-Right handsome I expect. By the way, Ben, if you need to kill time, knock Gabe Benjamin's door. He is always looking for company when he leaves on one of his capers.

-I'll remember that. I have to get some shut-eye. I am whipped.

-Hey man, I can't imagine being on tour for three months with Japanese musicians and talking to them through an interpreter.

-Let me tell you bro, it was brutal.

* * *

Dan Arris left Gringovitch's home and headed down the street to his parked car. Three car alarms were shrieking on the block. When Dan arrived at his car, there were no broken windows and all four tires were inflated and still on the car. He pulled out and gunned it up Third Street.

Arris was so mad he was talking to himself.

-Not so sure about this Clarone guy. I think Gringovitch has compromised the whole deal bringing in Clarone. Clarone is such a chump. He could blow this whole thing for us. Clarone probably has ten shamuses on his tail. If his picture appears on the cover of the *Daily News* tomorrow morning, he is useless to us. Anatoly is either really smart, or falling into a big trap. Smith is the cagiest art sleuth there is.

-I'll bet good money Smith has a tail on Clarone. Maybe Clarone is still a murder suspect, but they are letting him lead them to the other conspirators. Smith stumbling into an art fraud is just rum luck. He must know Gringovitch and Clarone go back thirty years or more. Gringovitch is clean. But, how would Smith know about the Gorky? There is very minor documentation and no provenance. Smith would have to be a Gorky scholar to put the pieces together. And then, no one knows that Matta filched the painting. Basically the painting doesn't exist.

Arris pulled into the White Castle on Atlantic Avenue. He ordered 4 double sliders, a large fries, and a Coke. That grease smelled good in his beater car.

He peeled out of the parking lot and headed down Atlantic Avenue. At Bedford Avenue he turned right. At Avenue U he turned right and went to Coney Island Avenue and made a left and headed to Brighton Beach. At the end of Coney Island Avenue he parked and went up on the boardwalk. He sat on a bench and waited. About thirty minutes later a big Russian guy walked up to him and sat down.

-I need the whole *bona fides*

-Give me a name.

-Benjamin Adoyan. First name spelled B-E-N-J-A-M-I-N. Last name spelled A-D-O-Y-A-N. Here are the photos you'll need.

The big guy took the photos.

No one moved for five minutes. Just as the big guy stood up Dan said:

-By eleven this morning, at this bench.

-You got it boss.

To be continued.

