

Five Million Yen: Chapter 15

by Daniel Harris

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Ben woke to gunshots at three in the morning. He was groggy and fell back to sleep. He awoke at eight, took a shower and went downstairs. The grappa bottle was still in the parlor. He walked into the kitchen, saw the pegboard with the keys, took a set and left the house, being sure to carefully follow Gringovitch's locking instructions.

I should check the newspapers he thought and headed up to Seventh Avenue. He considered going into the cigar store for the paper, but decided to walk to Prospect Park and see some of the neighborhood. When he arrived at Prospect Park West, he turned left towards the monumental arch at Grand Army Plaza and walked to the big traffic circle. Following Plaza Street around the circle to the left, he came to a newsstand. He bought a Daily News and a Times. His picture was not in either paper. He was grateful for small favors. It was too early for the Post

The Daily News front page showed a high school graduation photo of Rita, and another of her father weeping. The headline read: **Good Student Gone Bad**

Ben searched the paper for a mention of his name, or a photo. Nothing. All this was good news to Ben. Apparently the New York City media had forgotten him. In one of the gossip columns there was a mention of Zoë, saying she had a new beau, Hans Von Schneider, a German body builder and action film star.

Ben walked back down Prospect Park West, found a bench in the sun and sat down. The sports pages were crying for George Steinbrenner to fire manager Billy Martin after the Cincinnati Reds swept the Yankees in the World Series. Bill Rodgers was interviewed after his first New York City marathon win, the first New York City marathon to start on Staten Island and run through all five boroughs. . There was nothing good on the financial front. A casual glance at Prospect Park could tell anyone that the city government could not fulfill its mandate to be the caretaker of the city. Papers and trash littered the streets and the park. The grass looked like it hadn't been mowed all summer. Homeless people populated the park benches and prime sheltered places in the park. All the park public buildings were shuttered and graffiti spattered. Ben wondered who would let such a magnificent place deteriorate like this? Apparently, no one had any vision, or concern, for the value of this great city. Ben was appalled. On his recent global tour he had seen lesser cities magnificently maintained and user friendly. He felt his blood start to boil. My government is acting like a scofflaw, why should I not take some liberties with the law?

Thinking of law, Ben remembered he had to call Lt. Harold Smith. He saw a pay telephone on the corner of Third Street and Prospect Park West. He folded the papers under his arm and headed towards the phone box. When he arrived, Ben discovered that there was no handset and the coin box had been jimmed.

Ben headed down Third Street towards Seventh Avenue. At the corner of Third Street and Eighth Avenue there was another pay phone. Ben picked up the handset and there was a dial tone. He inserted a quarter and dialed Smith's number. He was lucky, the phone recognized that a quarter was five cents more than the cost of a local call.

There was a taped answer. He left his name and said that he was fulfilling his promise to call. Shortly after he hung up and was about to walk away, the phone rang. He answered it.

-Yes?

-Mr.Green?

Ben knew this drug talk.

-Mr. Brown?

-Fifth and Union twenty minutes.

-Click.

Some low-level grass dealer would be looking for "The Man" at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Union Street in Park Slope. As Ben walked away from the phone a rheumy-eyed man looked at him hopefully.

-Wrong number, my friend.

The man stared at Ben and mumbled something unintelligible.

Ben walked into the Apollo restaurant and sat at a booth. The waitress was about as far from Greece as one could get. Her body was more akin to an African fertility fetish than a Greek goddess gracing a classic frieze.

-Coffee?

-Yes, black. And I'll take two eggs over hard, bacon, whole-wheat toast and a full stack. Put the eggs on the stack. And can I have an orange juice?

-Small or large?

-Large.

Ben didn't know what it was about breakfasts. He could last all day, if he had a good breakfast, sometimes even into the next day.

There was a motley assortment of customers in the restaurant. Mostly casually dressed young men and women who looked like freelancers of some persuasion. There was a Puerto Rican mother with three pre-school children sitting at a booth one removed from Ben. They were all girls. Their little hands held the forks vertically, as if they were tent poles. Not much food made it to their mouths. The mother kept looking at the front door as if expecting someone. Occasionally she would cut up one of her charges breakfast into smaller pieces. One would expect the three girls of that age to be talking incessantly, but they were silent.

Ben ate his meal and asked for another cup of coffee. He noticed a pay phone by the front door. He got up and walked over to the pay

phone. Just as he was about to put two dimes into the phone, the Puerto Rican mother rushed up to him and asked him to wait a few minutes before he made his call. She was expecting a call.

-OK, I'll wait. I'm in no hurry.

-Gracias.

-De nada.

Ben returned to his booth and began reading the New York Times. A few minutes later, the pay phone rang. The Puerto Rican woman ran to the phone, but the counter man answered it from a phone by the cash register.

-Juanita. It's for you.

-Thank you.

There was an animated conversation in Puerto Rican Spanish. From what Ben could tell, it was about rent money and alimony. After a few minutes the calling party apparently hung up as the woman stared at the handset and then slammed it on the hook.

-Bastard!

She walked back to the girls and told them to finish up. The girls pushed the food around their plates and drank some juice.

-OK, let's go, she announced.

The fertility goddess brought a check and presented it to the woman.

-I will have to sign this. I have no money.

The counterman put on a long suffering face and said:

-Juanita, you have to pay soon. I can't keep letting you eat for free.

As if on cue, the three little girls began to cry. A man in a business suit walked up to the counterman and said,

-Here's my check and what does the woman owe for the girls?

-The total bill for you and the girls is seven-fifty.

-Here's eight dollars.

-Thank you mister. You are too kind, Juanita said. The little girls cheered.

-You're welcome. Just remember to keep your girls in school when the time comes. It is the only way to success. Schooling.

The suit held the door for the woman and her charges. The counterman looked at Ben.

-He's a very kind and lonely man.

-Yes, I can see that.

-He's the principal of the Berkley-Carroll school. He lost his wife to cancer last year. It hit him hard. He takes a lot of his meals here. We try to feed him well, but apparently he doesn't eat enough. He's lost almost fifty pounds.

-That's tough. Seems like a terrific fellow.

-They don't make them like that anymore.

Ben went to the phone and called his service. Heather answered.

-Heather, what are you doing answering the phone?

-Well, Hilary is in love, so she calls in sick now and again. Probably up too late.

-I'm calling for any new messages.

-Let me look.

There was a short pause.

-Yes, a Jean-Claude Lyon from Monte Carlo telephoned and wants you to call him as soon as possible. Also a Hidenora Matsuoka called and wants to know if you have deposited the check. Do you need the telephone numbers?

-Yes, I've lost my address book.

-What's going on with you Ben? Losing address books, wives, instruments.

-Just going through a bad spell I guess.

Ben could just see her bending over to adjust the ankle strap on her pumps and revealing those gorgeous breasts.

-Heather, are you teasing me?

-What ever could you mean?

-You know flashing cleavage.

-How can you tell that over the phone?

-I know you, Heather.

-You must be pretty randy, Ben, to imagine that at nine-thirty in the morning.

-Just give me the telephone numbers.

Ben looked around and motioned to the African Queen for a pen, She handed Ben her Bic. He wrote the numbers on the face of a one-dollar bill.

-One of these days Heather, we are going to go out on the town.

-I've heard that before. Ben, you are such a tease.

-Well, every time I asked, you turned me down.

-But you were married. Try me now.

-Hugs and kisses, sweetie. I'll be in touch again soon. Dinner and a show.

-Same old, same old, Ben. Get a new story.

-Ciao, baby.

Ben would have to go to the AT&T phone bank at Grand Central Station to make these calls. Or, maybe Gringovitch would let him call from his house. Gringovitch was always making international calls to his wife in Rome and other calls to Europe and Asia.

Ben paid his check and left the restaurant. He decided to go back to Gringovitch's and see if he was up. If he were awake, Ben would ask if he could use the phone.

When he got to Gringovitch's house, Ben unlocked the middle lock, and then the lower lock. Following instructions, Ben didn't touch the upper lock. The door would not open. Very strange, he just unlocked and locked the door an hour ago.

-Now what? Ben walked down the front steps and up Third Street to Seventh Avenue.

The Brooklyn Cigar Store looked empty. The owner, Augie, was outside on the corner looking through a Nikon camera on a tripod.

-What are you photographing?

-Every morning I take one roll of film of this intersection from the exact same place and the exact same time. I have volumes of photos. The same shots every morning, each is slightly different.

-Sounds pretty conceptual to me.

-It is, but if you put them together as a flipbook and flip it as a film, there's a lot of difference. Like today, you will be in today's picture crossing Seventh Avenue.

Tomorrow, who knows?

-Very cool. I know some music like that.

-Yeah, Gringovitch says you are a pretty advanced musician.

-I don't know about that, I make my money playing mostly studio work for all kinds of jingles, television shows and occasionally films. I make ninety percent of my money as a back-room musician. The fun creative stuff barely pays.

-He says you are one of the best,

-Doesn't count, he's an old friend. Gringovitch and I go back to boyhood Chicago.

Augie started taking the camera off the tripod.

-By the way, Gringovitch says the last box of cigars was defective.

-That's not good. Are you sure?

Ben didn't know what to say.

-That's what Gringovitch told me.

-I can give you a credit slip, but you have to call from some other phone than the pay phone in my store. Go up to Jack's Park Slope Tavern, or use the phone in the subway.

Augie and Ben went into the store. Augie made out a credit slip and gave it to Ben. On the back was a telephone number.

Just as Ben was leaving, Austerlitz walked into the store.

-Ah, Clarone what's shaking? Austerlitz was too upbeat to be trusted.

-The usual.

Ben didn't like the whiff of this guy. He seemed as treacherous as black ice.

-I hope "the usual" is not beating up young women in SRO's.

-Oh no. My estranged wife keeps me on a short leash. Every time I get on a subway or bus, she's watching me.

-So, Clarone, what's it like boning a hot babe like Zoë Bontemps?

-Jesus, Austerlitz, is that all you horny dudes can think of? Everyone I talk to asks me that question. All you guys can think about is boffing actresses.

-There are worse things one can think about.

-Let me outta here. Ben headed for the front door.

-Before you go, here's a little something to brighten your day.
Austerlitz handed Ben an envelope.

-Sucker! Austerlitz yelled as he slipped out the front door of the store and headed down Seventh Avenue. The envelope was from the Office of the Clerk, New York State Supreme Court, 60 Centre Street, New York, NY 10007.

To be continued

