

Five Million Yen: Chapter 17

by Daniel Harris

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Ben left the passport office and cut across Rockefeller Plaza. The skating rink was open and the usual show-offs were cutting graceful figures to an appreciative, ever-changing audience. He walked down Avenue of the Americas and turned right onto 48th Street, the musicians' street.

He went to Manny's Music. This was a special and crazy place. While there were isolated rooms to test acoustic musical instruments, it seemed guitar players could plug into any available amp and rip through their repertoire of hot licks. Drummers were in a special room, but the door was always opening and closing, changing the acoustic properties of the drum sounds like a Wha-Wah pedal changes a guitar sound.

Ben made his way through a throng of young musicians who were watching a famous rock guitarist put a new model guitar through its paces. Ben cut over to the woodwind section.

-Ben!

-Hey, Charlie, what's hap'ning?

Charlie was a tall, very thin guy who played baritone saxophone in the higher priced society bands in the city. He was always stooped, as if the weight of his heavy baritone sax was a constant presence.

-Long time no see, Ben.

-I've been on the road for three months.

-Whew, that's a long time. Ever have any clean clothes?

-Not too often. Say, Charlie, I need contra-bass reeds. Got any?

-Lemme look. I don't think so, but you might get lucky.

-My stash of prime VanDoren's was stolen along with my ID's and all my stuff.

-Bummer.

Charlie sorted through a wooden drawer that had boxes and boxes of clarinet reeds.

-Ben, I've got a full box of LaVoz contrabass reeds and an open box with five reeds.

-I'll take all you got. I premiere a new Hausenstockmann piece in Monte Carlo in two weeks. If it's anything like the last piece of his I played, it will take a great reed.

-Ever try a plastic reed?

-Yeah, but I never liked the sound. I know a lot of pit-orchestra guys use them. But those guys have to juggle a slew of horns. I just need to sound great on one horn for this gig.

-This is a new company. They impregnate a real reed with resin. You can sand it and adjust it with a knife just like a regular cane reed. Probably be the last reed you will ever buy for your contra.

-Hmm, I don't know. Those traditional Europeans might take offense if I use a plastic reed.

-Tell you what. I'll give you one. If you use it, let me know and I'll tell the company rep. You might be able to pick up some spare coin doing a testimonial.

-I'll try it. Thanks.

-I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

-I hope so, my current stock of reeds is getting pretty thin and the good ones have a lot of notes on them. I chipped my best reed doing overdubs for the new *Chain* album yesterday afternoon.

-Bummer. You seem to have some kinda bad luck, Clarone.

-Well, I guess I'm just a SOL guy. What do I owe you?

-For you, let's see. The unopened box is \$7.50. I sell you the five in the opened box for seventy-five cents apiece. The hybrid reed I'll give you. That comes to \$11.25 plus 56 cents tax. \$11.81 total.

-Here's twelve bucks. Keep the change.

-Thanks, Ben. You're always such a generous guy, he said sarcastically. Say, Ben, thirty new Buffet R-13 soprano clarinets just arrived. A couple of them are superb, if you need another soprano clarinet, or have some students who are looking to upgrade. I can sell them to you for \$370 apiece.

-Not at the moment, but I'll keep that in mind. Soprano clarinets are up to \$370?

-Those Frogs keep trying to cover our inflation.

Ben shook his head. He would be in Frogland in a day or so.

-Say, isn't Zoë Bontemps your wife? I see her picture all over, on the buses, trains, posters ...everywhere.

-I think *was* my wife is more correct.

-Ah, too bad. She's a hot babe.

-Can't keep the temperature up all the time. The marriage is cold now.

-Christ, with your touring schedule, I don't know how you could be married anyway.

-It puts a strain on things for sure.

Charlie shook his head in a concordant way.

-I've got to keep movin'. Gotta pick up my contra at Bright Star and get back to the passport office. Thanks for the reed and see you when I get back in mid-November, Charlie.

Ben left Manny's and cut over to 46th street to Frompini's Woodwind Repair.

Sal's shop was on the second floor. Ben hit the buzzer. The door buzzer responded. He walked up the stairs and into Sal's cluttered but welcoming shop.

Sal Frompini knew the history of everything woodwind: horns, mouthpieces, ligatures, reeds, manufacturers, repairmen, and teachers. He was also the best woodwind repairman in New York City. The walls of his shop were covered with hundreds of autographed publicity headshots of the famous players whose horns he had serviced.

-Hey, look who's back in town, the big guy himself. Sal, a five-by-five rotund Italian, had a big welcoming smile.

-Hey, Sal. Big Tony. Looks like nothing's changed. The contrabass saxophone is still over in the corner missing half its keys, the drinking fountain is still broken and looks like you guys are keeping the local Brazilian restaurants fat. How do you do it?

Both Sal and Tony shrugged their shoulders. This kind of chiding was the usual kibitzing of this shop.

-Hey, Ben, what's hap'nin'? It was a deep black voice behind him.

Ben turned and saw the giant frame of Burland Hawkes.

-Burland, what's shaking, bro? Still playing in the Arkestra?

-Yeah, still having the time of my life with Sun Ra. You just missed Hamit Bluiett and David Murray. Sal had to put their horns right after they collided on stage.

-Well, those World Saxophone Quartet guys put on a great show. I'm surprised that doesn't happen with you guys in Sun Ra's Arkestra with all the dancing and moving he has you do.

-Close, but no cigars so far. Don't forget, space is the place, man.

Everyone chuckled hearing Sun Ra's famous saying.

Ben turned to Sal Frompini.

-You still dealing in reeds?

-What do you need, a number 99 ancient Greek sopranino Aulos reed? Quipped Sal sarcastically.

Ben was always buying the stiffest reeds for some of the oddest instruments. Reeds were numbered one to five in half steps with five being the stiffest.

-Close, Sal. Try contrabass clarinet reeds.

-Tony, check the drawer under the display counter, but I think you are SOL, Ben.

-Sal, I was born SOL.

-I've heard of being born under a bad sign, but never SOL. SOL is what they stamp on your welfare application in Philly, when they turn you down. I have first-hand experience with that one, brothers. Burland made the gesture of a government clerk stamping

a paper as he relayed this pearl of urban underclass wisdom in his deep mellifluous bass voice.

-I hear you bro, I was stamped SOL at birth.

-They don't cut anyone much slack in the City of Brotherly Love.

Tony shook his head.

-No luck, Ben.

Sal gestured towards the back of the store where piles of instrument cases and carcasses of vintage woodwinds were precariously stacked.

-Tony look in the case of that old LeBlanc paperclip contrabass we have for sale in the back. There might be a box of reeds in there.

They could hear Big Tony grumbling to himself as cases and instruments shifted and tumbled. Tony was a big guy, everytime he bent over he would grunt. He was Big Tony because his son, Little Tony had worked in the store since high school, but quit to go on the road with Woody Herman.

-So, Ben, what's the urgent need for contra reeds, asked Sal? You always seem to catch me short.

-I'm premièring a new Hausenstockmann duo concerto in Monte Carlo next month. I leave Thursday.

-Nice place, said Burland. The Arkestra played there a few years back. There's nothing but high rollers in that place. He rubbed his thumb and first two fingers together, the universal gesture for money. If the casino doesn't take your money, the women will.

-Ben, you're going to have your hands full. All the Philharmonic guys were in here last month because Boulez had programmed a Hausenstockmann piece and the parts were so hard they wanted their horns tweaked to the max. I was going crazy staying here with them until the wee hours.

-Well, Sal, I may darken your door tomorrow to have the contra tweaked. I noticed yesterday that it was showing the effects of a three-month tour.

-Well, get here early. I'm going to a *bris* tomorrow evening. The dinner afterwards will be top drawer, the best caterers, booze and

the great Klezmer band, *Schleps of Zion*. You know Aaron Schlepis, Ben?

-I met him once at Kal Opperman's studio. He sounded pretty amazing to me.

-For klezmer, Aaron's your clarinetist.

Sal turned to face the back of his shop.

-Tony, any luck?

There was no reply.

-I guess he got buried alive in that junk heap, opined Burland.

Big Tony emerged triumphant holding an unopened box of contrabass reeds.

-Pay dirt. The finest Vandoren 3 1/2 contrabass reeds you will ever find.

-I'll take them all, said Ben with a big smile. I knew you wouldn't let me down Sal. What do I owe you?

-How many reeds in that box, Tony? It's an old one before those Frogs kept raising the price and reducing the number of reeds in the box.

-It says twenty on the box.

-Ben, give me ten bucks.

-You got it. I'd like to stay, but duty calls. I have to pick up my passport at the passport office in an hour. Thanks guys and see you tomorrow morning, Sal.

Ben turned to Burland and they did a palm slap and a fist bump.

-See you bro, and good luck with Sun Ra.

-Likewise, Ben. Great seein' you. Play pretty in Monte Carlo.

Ben hustled down the stairs and onto 46th street. He loved the brotherhood of the musician. A place like Frompini's was a treasure and an important lifeline for woodwind players.

He walked over to Seventh Avenue and up to 47th street. There was an empty cab on the corner. Ben rapped on the rear door. The driver, an old Irish guy in a newsboy cap, unlocked the door.

-I have two stops. Bright Star on 54th between Tenth and Ninth Avenues, and then the Passport Office at Roc on Fifth Avenue.

-How long is the wait at the first stop?

-Three minutes. I just have to pick up a musical instrument.

The driver crossed Seventh and Broadway and continued on to Tenth Avenue. He turned right on Tenth Avenue and then right on 54th Street.

-Stop right here, Ben told the driver. I'll be back in a couple minutes.

The driver pulled up to the curb. Ben slid over the back seat to the right side door and jumped out of the cab. He pushed the bell for Bright Star. After a too long delay, Sabrina, pushed the door opener.

-Sabrina, you look so demure today.

-I have a cold. Everytime it rains, I get a cold. It's the air conditioning in here.

-I thought everytime it rains, it rains pennies from heaven.

-Ben! Such cornball stuff you say.

-Listen, I need to get my contrabass clarinet. Is anyone here from the shop? That's where I last put it.

-Jimmy's on duty, but he's in Studio D setting up for a session. Why don't you go back to the shop and get it. I'll tell Jimmy you took it.

-Great. I'll be right back.

Ben hustled down the hallway and into the shop. His contrabass was under Jimmy's bench. Ben thought he should leave a note, but time was pressing.

He saw his soprano clarinet case, opened it, and took out all his reed tools. He put them and the reeds he had purchased in the contrabass case. He carefully put all the travel padding back in the contrabass case and closed it. He put the travel strap around the case under the carrying handle.

-Thank you, Sabrina. Don't forget to tell Jimmy I took the contrabass, or he'll have a heart attack.

-I won't forget. Come back soon, Ben.

-I will. Who wouldn't want to feast eyes on the beautiful Sabrina?

-Don't flirt, Ben.

-Just kidding. I'm off to Monte Carlo.

-Owiee! Can you take me?

-Would love to, but I'll be sleeping with the contrabass.

-Have a great trip and a good gig.

-Ciao, Sabrina.

Ben bolted out the door. The cab had pulled up the street.

-Gotta put this in the trunk.

-No can do my friend.

-Why not?

The cabbie opened the trunk. It was full of spare tires.

-Jesus. OK. It will have to go across the back seat and one end on my lap.

Ben wrestled the horn into the back seat and slid under the end by the right side door. Too bad it wasn't a Checker, there would have been plenty of room.

-Hope there's not much traffic. I have to get my passport at the Passport Office by four o'clock.

-You should make it.

Traffic proved the cabbie a liar.

The cabbie pulled up at Rockefeller Center across from St Patrick's Cathedral.

-Can you help me out with this case?

The cabbie got out and reluctantly opened the right side door. Ben slid the contra out to him.

-Here's the fare and something extra.

The cabbie looked at the money and gave Ben a black look.

-You call that a tip?

-All I have is hundred dollar bills, man, so that's what you get. A five-dollar tip for a twenty-dollar fare is generous.

-Cheap bastard musician.

Ben grabbed the handle of the contrabass case and using one of the non-revolving doors entered the complex. He walked up the steps to the Passport Office.

-You'll have to put that luggage over there, sir.

-This is a musical instrument of great value. I'd rather keep it with me.

-I don't make the rules. I enforce the rules.

-Will you be watching it?

-Most likely, but I have other duties.

Ben had no choice. He put the contrabass case behind a velvet rope where the guard told him.

-Better be here when I return.

The guard ignored him.

Ben showed a different guard the paper with his case number.

-Go directly to window 23.

Ben walked to window 23. There was no line and no one attending the window.

He looked for a bell or buzzer. There were neither. Ben looked around. All the other windows were attended.

-Why me? Why me?

After a few more minutes, a wizened black man inquired of Ben what he was doing at this window. He showed him the paper with the case number.

-You'll have to go to window 3. Then you come here to window 23.

-You sure?

-Yes, sir.

-OK.

There were ten people in line at window 3. Each person seemed to have a special situation that took forever. Ben saw one person leave window 3 and go to window 23. The same person that was attending window 3 also was attending window 23.

-Behold, our government at work, Ben announced *sotto voce*

Finally Ben arrived at the window. He gave a last look around to be sure his contrabass was still in the luggage-holding area. It was.

-Show me your case paper, please.

Ben slid it under the brass bars.

-You are Benjamin Franklyn Clarone?
-Yes. Franklyn is spelled with a "y".
-My mother spelled my brother's name that way. Where are you from?
-I was born in Chicago.
-So was I. Great city, but it's not New York.
-No place is.
-What was your neighborhood?
-I grew up in Lincoln Park.
-I grew up in Hyde Park. My father was a professor of Classics at the University of Chicago.
All this chitchat was irritating Ben.
-Would you please sign here, Mr. Clarone?
Ben signed.
-Now go to window 23.
Ben walked over to window 23. He noticed his contrabass was still there. At window 23 the same clerk gave him his passport.
-Where are you going, may I ask?
-Monte Carlo. I'm a musician and am performing with the Monte Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra.
-Sounds exciting.
-Musicians always want an exciting performance, but no outside excitement.
-Bon voyage.
-Merci bien. Au revoir.

Ben carefully put his passport in his inside windbreaker pocket. He had two identities in that pocket.

-Keep this jacket zipped, Ben told himself sternly.

He saw his contrabass case and picked it up. There were no guards in attendance. He walked down the stairs and out the door.

-Someone could have boosted this easy as pie, Ben said to himself.

He was about to hail a cab when he remembered he only had big bills on him. He knew there was a bar where television people hung out at on Sixth Avenue. They would know how to handle a c-note.

Ben started walking again through the Rockefeller Center complex. When he got to Sixth Avenue he turned downtown and saw Herlihy's Bar. He entered. It was definitely an NBC crowd. They were pretty full of themselves. He found a booth and sat down, parking his contrabass on the seat opposite.

-Hey, put that on the floor. It was a big guy who looked like an IRA enforcer talking to him.

-OK, man.

Ben slid the case under the table.

-What'll you have? Ben guessed the big guy was his waiter.

-Give me a pint of Guinness and a Shepard's pie.

-We might be out of Shepard's pie.

Ben didn't feel too welcome in this place. Too bad Jim & Andy's was no more. It was a real musician's bar. The waiter brought his Guinness in an ice-cold stone mug.

-Ah, that's good stuff.

-There's no Shepard's pie left.

-How about fish and chips?

-Good choice. Comes with Cole slaw.

-Perfecto!

-Can you have the chef make those chips well done?

-You think we don't know from chips here?

-No, not that, I just like my chips crispy.

The waiter turned towards the kitchen mouthing "asshole musician" to an assemblage of NBC technical staff, who laughed a little too heartily.

Ben nursed the beer and wondered if the AT&T phone center at Grand Central was still open. It should be. He would go there next and call Jean-Claude Lyon in Monte Carlo.

The waiter brought his fish and chips. He all but slammed the plate on the table.

-Can I have white vinegar with the chips?

-It's on the table in that bottle, he said, pointing to a clear plastic squirt-bottle.

-Thanks.

The fish was greasy. The chips were cold and soggy in the middle and burned on the outside. The slaw was mostly flavorless mayonnaise with a few lonely pieces of cabbage from a previous century.

-Jesus, this crap food gives New York City a bad name. Well, what do TV engineers know about food? NBC class, my ass, he thought, remembering Zoë was now an NBC star.

-Anything else, sir?

-No. Just the check.

Ben poured the Cole slaw on the untouched chips and greasy fish. He hid the mess with the napkin. He drained the Guinness.

-At least the beer was good.

The waiter put the check next to the wreckage of his uneaten lunch. Ben picked up the check. Five dollars for the Guinness, \$12.50 for the fish and chips, and 88 cents tax. \$18.38 total. What a tourist rip-off, he mumbled to himself.

-Do I pay you?

-Yes.

Ben fingered a Franklin out of his wallet and gave it to the waiter.

-I'll bring your change, sir.

The waiter brought back a Texas bankroll.

-Here's fifty singles, a twenty and a five.

-Hey, where's the rest?

-I took out my tip. You musicians are so cheap.

-Don't go anywhere until I count this change.

Ben counted the change. It was as the waiter said.

-Thanks for being honest with the tip.

The waiter ignored Ben and cleared the table.

Ben slid the contrabass out from under the table and left Herlihy's. He spotted a Checker yellow cab coming up Sixth Avenue. He snared it, slid the contrabass into the back seat and jumped in.

-Grand Central, and don't waste time.
To be continued.

