

Five Million Yen: Chapter 2

by Daniel Harris

West 103rd Street, New York City

Ben exited the uptown Broadway Local at 103rd and oriented himself. Not being his neighborhood it took a few seconds to get his bearings. Looking up the curve of Broadway in the rain and mists with its sins hidden in the dark, Broadway almost looked like the majestic boulevard the city planners had envisioned in 1811. There was a Rexall drugstore on the corner. He entered to inquire about the SRO. People backed away from him as if he were a contagious pathogen. He remembered his filthy backpack and personal schmeck. A blind man was standing by the front door out of the rain, his hand held a cup.

—Say, brother, is there an SRO near here?

—Over on Amsterdam. One block. Big red building. Artist Studios. Bad news place, brother.

—Thanks, my man.

Ben reached in his pocket and dropped coins from various countries into the man's cup.

—Hey, brother. That doesn't sound like American money.

How would a blind man know it was a red brick building? thought Ben

Ben crossed 103rd Street. An uptown 104 bus passed with a picture of Zoë on the side advertising the television series, *I'd Rather Not*. That was the off-off-off Broadway play Zoë co-authored and starred in, which NBC acquired and made into a hit sit-com starring Zoë. Ben didn't know she was negotiating with NBC when he left for the tour.

Jesus, thought Ben, my wife leaves but she doesn't leave. How can it get more screwed up?

The SRO occupied the whole block on Amsterdam between 103rd and 104th. It looked like it had been a prison or asylum. Probably nothing had changed except now one paid to stay there.

He entered, walked up three steps to the lobby. The check-in counter was on the right. It was surrounded by bulletproof glass. There was a buzzer with a sign.

Do Not Push Buzzer This Means You!

Ben pushed the buzzer. Nothing. He pushed it again. Ben was expecting some sleepy-eyed, old troll to appear; instead from a door behind the desk an Adonis appeared.

—Can't you read the sign? Adonis snickered in a mezzo-soprano voice.

—Sorry man, I need a room.

—There are no rooms.

—I don't see a no vacancy sign.

—Maybe there're no rooms for you.

—I've got money.

—How much?

—Five Million Yen.

—We don't take Jap money.

—I've got American.

—OK. The only room left is \$12.50 a week.

—I'll take it.

—Here are the rules: No firearms; no guests; no loud noise. Men live on the even floors. Women live on the odd floors. You use the bathrooms and showers on the even floors. If you are caught on the wrong floor, you are evicted with no refund of your rent. Got it?

—Yeah

—Wait a minute. I'll get your key.

Adonis disappeared through the door and returned with a key on a fishing float.

—This is the key. If you are out, give the key to the person at the desk. Your room is 7D. The toilet is across the hall. The shower is opposite the elevator. If you have valuables, keep them in the safe

down here. Sign here and initial here that you understand the rules.

—Wait a minute. 7D sounds like it is on an odd floor.

—Not in this hotel.

Ben signed.

—Here's the key. Take the elevator.

Ben went to the elevator. He pushed the button and waited. It took forever for the elevator to arrive. He entered the elevator and pushed seven. The inside door closed in slow motion. Ever so slowly the elevator began its ascent. It paused twice between floors on the way up. Each time it paused Ben snapped awake from a standing doze.

When the elevator arrived at the seventh floor, Ben pushed the outside door open and looked left and right. It was a hallway with a tattered red rug. It seemed that 7D was to the left. The door across the hall from the elevator said: SHOWER

It was open and two pairs of hairy legs were visible under the shower curtain. Ben turned left and found 7D on the right. The key barely entered the lock. After a hard twist, there was a sharp click and he was in. When he flicked on the light he could see cockroaches scurrying out of sight.

—What a dump! said Ben out loud

Plaster was missing from the walls. The single bed was well made, though a mattress spring was visibly poking through the bedding. Ben threw his pack on the floor and shook his head.

—What a lousy flop, he said to the room.

There was a hot plate sitting on a mini-fridge and two coat hooks on the wall opposite the bed. A bare overhead bulb was the only nighttime source of light. There was a window that faced an air shaft.

Ben opened the window and heard a couple arguing about the man's drinking. Someone was playing *In The Mood* on a tenor saxophone. Ben closed the window.

The sheets and towels looked fresh and clean. The stove and fridge were clean, though the fridge was empty.

Ben took his pack, opened it and emptied it on the bed. There was a bathrobe, a toiletry bag and a festering wad of dirty clothes. There were also two books, *Walden* and *Breakfast of Champions*. He disrobed, put on the bathrobe. He hid his wallet and passport under the mattress. After locking the door, he walked barefoot down the hall to the shower with his toiletry bag and a fresh towel. There were no sounds on his floor.

When he arrived at the shower room, it was empty. He closed and locked the shower room door. He turned the faucets full on. A thin rivulet of water drained from the showerhead.

—What the Hell, he said. Well, I've had worse showers in the last three months.

He wetted himself, soaped himself and was rinsing himself when the shower suddenly ran cold.

—What the...

The water almost stopped. Ben turned the faucets fully both ways, but to no avail. A small steady drip was all that issued from the shower. With great patience he slowly rinsed off the remaining soap. He dried himself with the clean towel.

—At least I smell better, he said to his reflection in a mirror.

He left the shower and walked back toward his room. The bathroom door across the hall from his room was open. He entered, tested the water which ran hot and strong. He took his time giving himself a good shave. Even after shaving, he still looked crazy with red-rimmed sunken eyes.

Well, a good sleep and I'll be ready for the world, he thought as he walked across the hall to his room. The door was ajar.

—What the Hell?

He looked inside; his empty pack was on the floor. All the contents were missing and the mattress was pulled off the bed.

—Shit. God damn it! he shouted.

Frantically he searched the room. Everything was gone except his pack. Ben made a mental inventory of the missing:

His wallet

His check for five million Yen

His passport
His Driver's License
His 802 musicians' union card
His Sinclair and Hess gas credit cards
His Macy's credit card
\$9.50 in cash
His smelly shirts and underwear
His chinos with the shinny seat
His wadded up tux
His special stash of contrabass clarinet reeds
His Swiss Army knife
A three pack of Japanese special thin Kimono condoms
His date/address book
His First National City checkbook
His First National City ID
His photo of Zoë's posing nude at Chittenango Falls State Park.

He wondered what Zoë did with the car, his wardrobe, music, books, and especially his other musical instruments. He didn't have a dime for a phone call or shoes to walk down the street. Forget about clothes to wear. This bathrobe wasn't going to cut it on a wet and raw late October night.

He wrestled the mattress back on the bed frame and sat on it.

Let's see. I have no check, no money, no home, no clothes, and no food. I'm not anyone anymore. I'm like those naked Jaina he saw on the roadside in India, not even a begging bowl.

Wrapped in his robe and barefoot, he took the elevator to the reception level. No one was at the desk; the only light was a dim desk lamp with a green shade. He leaned on the no-ring bell. Eventually an arthritic, wizened old man appeared dressed in pajamas, bathrobe and slippers. This was the troll he expected when he checked in.

—What do you want and who are you?

—I'm Ben Clarone and I'm in room 7D. I have been robbed.

—What?

—I'm Ben Clarone. I'm in room 7D. I have been robbed.

—When did that happen?

—Just now.

—Did you leave your room?

—Yes, I took a shower and a shave.

—Well it was an inside job.

—What do you mean?

—There is only one key for all the units in this building. You have to understand that with all these junkies; we have to have access. Bad stuff happens all the time. Sorry you were robbed. You must have flashed money.

—No way. Listen asshole, I just came from traveling in twenty-five countries and I stayed in lots of hotels and was never robbed. This place is responsible.

—No way mister Calzone. You signed a waiver that says we are not responsible. Like you have money for a lawyer?

—It's Clarone, asshole. C-L-A-R-O-N-E. We'll see what the cops have to say about this.

—Do you have money to call the cops asshole?

—You calling me an asshole?

—You called me an asshole, asshole.

—OK. Fuck it. How do I get my clothes and wallet back?

—You figure it out.

He slammed down the bulletproof glass window and disappeared.

When Ben exited the elevator on the seventh floor the shower door was closed and a female voice was singing *The Man I Love*. It sounded to Ben like there was a strong steam of water in the shower. Steam leaked from the top of the ill-fitting door.

What is a woman doing on this floor in the shower? And why was there such an abundance of hot water?

The number next to the elevator door said seven. Three steps from his room, he noticed that his door was ajar again.

—Now what?

He hit the door as hard as he could with his open hand. Nothing. No one.

Doing a quick survey of his room he noticed that his backpack and toiletries bag were missing

—I don't believe it! I don't fucking believe it! he shouted.

Ben sat down on the bed with his head in his hands. All he had in life was a bathrobe, some horns stashed in a recording studio and an unsafe flop for six more nights.

* * *

You're a smart guy Ben. How did you get yourself into this situation? Where did you screw up? Where was the chink in your armor? You, Mr. Perfection. You belittled everyone you deemed not your equal. You were an abusive egocentric jerk. You, Ben Clarone, mister despicable, you're an ass, unforgiving, uncaring, mean, bullying jerk. That's what you are. No wonder you lost your wife. You, genius Ben, maestro Ben, mister perfecto are now reduced to nothing. Nothingness envelops you in its shroud of wretchedness. Only this miserable flop harbors you from the street. You're an eye-blink from homelessness.

You catalog your nothingness:

No chair

No food

No drink

No glass

No plate

No fork

No spoon

No knife

No clothes

No shoes

No identity

No money

No woman

No hope

No job

No begging bowl

No blind man's cup

Nothing, Nada, Zero, Zilch

You haven't thought about food until now. Your last meal was on a plane somewhere over South Dakota. Lukewarm beef tenderloin tips with ersatz mashed potatoes, mushy lima beans and an angel food cake without holiness. You bounced over the great American continent wedged in an economy seat. Hurrying to what...this, this nothingness. This Manhattoes churning with hope and riches, scene of your greatest triumphs, but now you grovel in this heap of the dispossessed and wretched.

The nor'easter slashed against the window. The reek of roach poison and the funk of generations of the unwashed hung heavy in the stuffy room. The banging of the radiator signaled the arrival of heat.

What was your mistake, Ben? What triggered the robbery? You wrack your brain. Think, Ben, Think.

That asshole old guy at the front desk asked:

—Did you flash money?

Did you flash money Ben? What did you say?

—I have five million Yen.

That must be it. Adonis must have robbed my room when I was in the shower. I'll bet the bastard turned the water off, so I would be in the shower for a long time. Ben, your job tomorrow is to grab that son-of-a-bitch and get your money back. You know he must be the thief, or the accomplice of the thief.

Hunger made his mind sharper. Thoughts and schemes for surviving this abysmal situation raced through his mind.

All the keys aren't the same; the old fart was talking out his ass, but I'm sure Adonis had a passkey. That old geezer dropped plenty of clues. I should have treated him better.

The steam heat arrived with a sputter followed by a steady hiss. The room became stiflingly hot. You open the window. A police siren arrived at the window creating three echoes. You perk up your ears.

—Now, that's pretty cool, you whisper to the dark rain.

The tenorman must have found a new reed, because he is playing *On Green Dolphin Street* with authority. The drunk and his wife are sleeping it off. It must be after one in the morning. An angry voice from somewhere in the court shouts.

—Shut that saxophone up god damnit. Every Saturday night I have to listen to your fucking saxophone.

The tenorman was phrasing like Ella Fitzgerald. You could hear Ella singing:

*And through these moments apart
Mem'ries live in my heart
When I recall the love I found on
I could kiss the ground on
Green Dolphin Street*

Well this was no Green Dolphin Street. You weren't kissing any Broadway concrete. Recalling love was remembering moments of masculine bravura and vainglory. The talented beautiful wife you've lost now floats up and down Broadway on the side of the number 104 bus, a ghost from your past, now in the glory of her present.

What did Zoë do with my saxophones? If I had one, I'd show that guy how to play Green Dolphin Street. Sure you would, but you can't because now you are nothing

Ben rips off his bathrobe and tosses it out the window. Standing there naked he screams:

—Ecce Homo! Ecce Homo! **ECCE HOMO!**

—Shut up you crazy bastard!

Ben falls on the bed. His left ham lands on the sharp broken spring, which delivers the stigmata of his failure. He has reached bottom.

To be continued.

