

Five Million Yen: Chapter 20

by Daniel Harris

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Gage and Tolner is a long narrow restaurant housed in an Italianate Brownstone on Fulton Street in downtown Brooklyn. Fulton Street had become tawdry, but Gage and Tolner was know for its longevity, since 1879, as well as its cuisine. The restaurant has four rows of tables running the nearly half-block length of the main room with two wide aisles. The walls are wood paneling alternating with mirrors. Gas lamps hanf over the middle of the room providing the lighting on selected nights. The effect is of a cozy subdued 1890's private club. The wait staff consisted of black middle-aged men in impeccable black formal attire. There was a system of medals, which denoted the length of service of each waiter. The specialties of the house were various shellfish dishes, fish, steaks and omelets. The house made no concessions to *nouvelle cuisine*. All the dishes were made to order in the classic American tradition using heavy doses of butter and cream.

When Ben and Anatoly entered, the *Maître d*, Mr. Warner, greeted Anatoly with a slight bow followed by a warm handshake.

-We have your table ready for you, Mr. Gringovitch. I believe the chef has a little surprise for you.

-A surprise?

-Yes, Sir, I think you will enjoy it immensely.

-May I inquire after your family?

-They are excellent. My daughter is expecting her first child.

-Congratulations. Is this your first grandchild?

-No, I have two grandsons, one each by my two sons.

-You look very fit for a grandfather.

-When you are a father, your children make you old, but when you're a grandfather, you grandchildren make you young.

-You've got that right about the children making you old. My stepchildren are terrific, yet they can test one's mettle.

-Mr. Warner, may I introduce my oldest friend, Ben Clarone. He's one of the top musicians in the world, said Anatoly gesturing to Ben.

-Pleased to met you Mr. Clarone. Let me show you gentlemen to your table.

Mr. Warner led them to their table with an easy and practiced grace. He held the chair for each man and introduced the waiter, which wasn't necessary, but was the ritual of the house.

-Mr. Gringovitch and Mr. Clarone, may I introduce your waiter, Mr. Charles Whitty.

-Good evening, gentlemen.

Charles was a tall slim black man with slight graying about the temples. His uniform sported two gold eagle medals.

-Mr. Whitty, what do the two gold eagles mean? Asked Ben.

-A gold eagle indicates twenty-five years of service at Gage & Tolner. A gold star on the uniform indicates five years and a gold bar one year. If you look closely there are two eagles and one gold bar, I have been serving customers here since 1925. That's fifty-one years of service. I started as a busboy at sixteen.

-Wow, exclaimed Ben, I don't think I know any musician who worked for the same employer that long. We're lucky to have a gig for more than a few weeks, unless you play in a symphony orchestra, or at the opera.

-Hey, Ben, I've worked for the same SOB seven days a week since I was sixteen.

-But your work for yourself, Anatoly.

-That's the joke my friend. Every one had a good chuckle.

-May I suggest a cocktail?

-What do you say, Ben, a double Bourbon Manhattan?

-Fits my needs.

The waiter left and returned with two Manhattans in beautiful stemware.

-Here's to old times and new adventures, proposed Ben.

-To old times and new adventures, joined Anatoly.

-Ah, now that's a great Manhattan, Anatoly.

-They make a fine one here.

What should we order, asked Ben?

-I suggest the lobster Bisque and then one of the shellfish entrees?

-That sounds good. Do you know what Chicago Broil Scallops are?

Mr. Whitty seemed to step out of nowhere to answer Ben's question.

-They are sea scallops wrapped in bacon, grilled with butter and lemon and plated in heavy seasoned cream sauce and served with apricot chutney.

-That sounds perfect for me. What are you having Anatoly?

-I'm going with my favorite, Crab á la Dewey. It is crabmeat in a heavy cream sauce with green peppers and pimienta.

When they had finished their Manhattans, Mr. Warner brought a bottle of California Chardonnay and a dozen blue Belon oysters on-the-half-shell artfully arranged in a layer of ice on a sterling silver platter.

-Now this IS a surprise, Ben.

-These slept in a Maine oyster bed last night and were flown in this morning, Mr. Whitty informed them. They are compliments of the Chef and the house.

-Please give the Chef and the house our thanks and appreciation.

The oysters were delicious. Definitely in the top two or three in Ben's extensive experience. The Chardonnay was dry and cold enough to tingle the teeth.

-A man could get used to this, Ben.

-For sure. Remember when we were about twelve and my father introduced the two of us to the joys of eating raw oysters at that oyster shack on the Chicago River, asked Ben.

-If memory serves, wasn't that after he took us to the boat show at the Coliseum?

-Yeah, that's right, Slava.

-I remember he said something about real oyster lovers not putting lemon juice or hot sauce on raw oysters. Just savor the flesh and let the brine cleanse your palate.

-You don't see *me* touching the lemons.

-My current wife, Francesca, has to put a drop of lemon juice on them to see if they wince. She's wants them alive when she eats them.

-Zoë would never eat raw selfish. She always ordered the same old boring shrimp cocktail.

-Some people don't know what they're missing.

The two men took their time savoring each oyster and having a thoughtful sip of the wine between oysters.

Mr. Whitty came and refilled their glasse

-These are some very tasty oysters, Mr. Whitty.

-I had one for lunch, Mr. Gringovitch; it was like manna from heaven. Chef knew you always eat here on Tuesday night when you are in town, so he saved a dozen of the best. Otherwise the power-lunchers from Borough Hall and the State Supreme Court would have cleaned us out at lunch.

-Please be sure to give him our thanks.

-Yes, Sir. What have you decided for dinner?

-We'll both have the Lobster Bisque and Ben will have the Chicago Broil Scallops. I'll have the Crabmeat á la Dewey.

-And a wine?

-Can we stay with the Chardonnay? It is quite excellent.

-You can, but I would recommend a nice Sauterne.

-Mr. Whitty, you have never steered me wrong in five years. We'll take the Sauterne.

-Yes sir, the Sauterne it is. I will bring your Lobster Bisque directly.

The busboy, sported two gold stars, and quietly cleared the table and reset it for the soup course.

The two men sat looking at each other with grins on their faces.

-Ben, we haven't done this in a long time. It is really terrific to sit here with you and enjoy a good meal.

-Likewise, Slava. It's funny though, it doesn't seem like it's been a long time or a couple of wives ago. It feels like we just picked up where we left off in Paris in 1971, just the two of us in a fine restaurant enjoying each other's company.

-The décor and the language were different, but the camaraderie is the same.

-You know Anatoly; you are more like my brother to me than my real brother.

-How is your brother?

-Sal is getting rich in the commodities business in Chicago. Last time I saw him he came to a gig of mine on Rush Street with his Serbian wife. You know he has two kids, a boy and a girl, and a big house on the lake in Winnetka.

-Hard to believe. Isn't he about ten years younger than you?

-Nine years.

The Lobster Bisque instantly changing the table from talk to enjoying the bisque.

Again the two-star busboy silently and quickly cleared the table and set it for the main entrée.

-Would you like me to set a small plate for each of you so you can taste each other's entrée?

-That would be perfect. I'm sorry I afraid I don't remember your name.

-I'm Leon Paterson, sir. Ten years of service. I usually only work the lunch service.

-Ah, that's why I don't know you. I only come for dinner on Tuesday evenings.

-You may have noticed that the gas lamps are on tonight. It is cool enough to use them. We don't use them in the warmer months, only the electric light.

-I thought the light was different. I should have noticed immediately.

-Yes, sir. We only use them now on Mondays and Tuesdays, but I like the 1890's atmosphere they create. Leon gave a small bow and left the table.

-I can't believe the city allows gas lamps in a restaurant, said Ben.

-Can't be any more dangerous than candles on tables with drunks.

-I guess you're right.

The main entrée arrived.

Mr. Whitty presented each dish as if it were a one-of-a-kind, just-made-for-you specialty, which it was.

-This smells out-of-this-world, Ben said inhaling a big cloud of steam coming off his scallops.

-You're going to love it, my friend.

Mr. Whitty served the wine. It was cold with a slight metallic taste, a nice balance for the rich seafood.

-I propose a toast to Arsheile Gorky, said Ben.

-A toast to Arsheile Gorky, may he find peace in a new home and bring fortune to us.

-Na Zdorovie! To Gorky!

-To Gorky! Na Zdorovie!

They clinked glasses.

The two men ate mostly in silence, except for an occasional wordless expression of appreciation for the quality of the food.

-Ben, try some of this crabmeat.

-Sure, and here's a scallop or two. This chutney has it all — hot, sweet, spicy, sour. Perfect with these rich scallops.

When they finished their meal, Mr. Whitty inquired about dessert.

-None for me, how about you Ben?

-I think a coffee black and a brandy would be enough.

-Two black coffees and two Napoleon Brandies, Mr. Whitty, if you would.

-Yes, Sir.

-That's more food and richer food than I've eaten in months. I had a few good meals, but mostly it was eat-on-the-run food on that three month tour.

-I don't know how you can do that. I have enough trouble flying from New York to Rome, or Paris.

-You never get use to it, but you learn how to adapt.

The coffee and brandy arrived. The brandy was a small gold puddle in the bottom of a huge snifter. They both swirled the brandy and inhaled a nose-clearing breath of fine brandy's fire.

-Ah, mother's milk.

-Not for me, you know I'm allergic to milk, Ben reminded Anatoly.

-Ben, you can be a real cornball.

-Hey, it's part of my *charme*, Ben said using the French pronunciation.

-You're going to need all your *charme* in the next two days. I was talking with Arris this afternoon. We want you to leave tomorrow night. It is the only way you will be able to do our mission and be ready to play the rehearsal with Hausenstockmann you have in Monte Carlo on Saturday. You will have to be at JFK by six tomorrow evening to catch that Pan Am flight to Nice.

-That's moving things up fast. I assume I will have to tell the Monte Carlo people I won't be there until Saturday. I haven't even seen the music yet and I know Arno Donax was having trouble with it and he's as good a player as I am on the contrabass. Locked up with a crazy Austrian composer all day and probably half the night is not going to be fun.

-Well, Ben, that's what it will have to be. You will be doing a lot of moving around in France once you arrive. Arris has all the details. He will be at my house about ten tonight. I thought I'd let you know in advance, so you wouldn't be taken by surprise and say something to get Arris P.O'd. You have to understand; he spent two years making those art forgeries and has a big investment in time and money arranging logistics with people on two continents. He's a big-time international player who doesn't take prisoners.

-I gathered. I don't want to screw up my gig and I definitely don't want to screw up our gig.

-You won't. I have great confidence in you. So does Arris, but he just doesn't show it. He knows...what is it you say?

-I've never missed a downbeat in my life.

-That's it.

-It's true, but it's also a joke. I forget what jazz musician, I think maybe it was Miles Davis, was asked if he read *Downbeat* magazine. That was his answer.

-Do all you musicians have such a cornball sense of humor?

-Beats me.

-Lets drink up and go. We have to meet Arris and we have to find you some clothes. You will be traveling as Benjamin Adoyan.

To be continued.

