

Five Million Yen: Chapter 21

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-Zoë Bontemps, you are a silly giggly drunk, sneered Arno Aghajanian, her Hollywood celebrity divorce lawyer.

-I told you I was a lousy drinker and that when I was drunk, I laughed like a fool in bed with a naked man.

-No wonder Ben would forbid you to drink.

-Well, you have no idea how funny it is to see a naked man, especially a hairy one with a big erection, with a condom on his dick. Back in the Catholic orphanage, they told us terrible stories of what a rampant man was like, and how contrary to God's Will it all was. When I've been drinking, all those stories and fantasies us girls would share come rushing back. All just silly girl humor.

-I guess I should take you home. You are my client, so perhaps it is for the best.

-I know you are disappointed, but there will be times to come. I promise.

-I think you are too drunk to promise anything.

-No, no. I like you a lot. I just need to focus and I can't do that when I'm drunk.

-No argument here, your highness.

-I'm really quite good in bed, but not when I'm drunk or stoned. Also, I have to be on the set at five-thirty tomorrow morning and it is already after eight, my bedtime.

-OK. I'll call my special car service. They don't talk and they don't tell. They will take you home and pick you up tomorrow morning at

four, drive you to your car at my office and you can make it to the studio by five-thirty.

-OK, but can't you just drive me to your office? she whined.

-No, absolutely not. You are too drunk to drive and I don't want to be a part of any DUI tickets. As a budding celeb, you don't need that on the front page of the tabloids or the fan mags. You *are* my client still, even if we didn't have a go-around in the bed.

Arno looked at her naked body and the blood was boiling in his veins. He turned away from her to hide his new erection.

-Look Zoë, I'll get dressed and leave you to get dressed.

-Good, I don't want you to watch me. If I need help I'll call you. I don't want to look too drunk or ravished when the car gets here.

-OK, I'll call the car service.

When Zoë left the bedroom and entered the living room with its view of the Pacific, she was haphazardly dressed and had stuffed her underwear in her handbag. Her smalls were visible, almost ready to fall out of her handbag.

-I love this view, Arno, said Zoë, hiccupping on the word love.

-Yes, it is one of only a few in LA. I worked hard for this, and I intend to enjoy it for the rest of my life.

Arno properly packed Zoë's underwear in her handbag and straightened her dress. She looked pretty drunk with mostly closed eyes and mascara smeared down to her cheeks. She was carrying one shoe in her right hand and was wearing the left shoe.

-You better sit down and I'll put on your other shoe.

Zoë collapsed in a lounge chair with her legs splayed out in front of her. Arno could see her pubic hair under her skirt.

-You better sit like a lady, Zoë, or the car service driver will crash his car looking at you in the mirror.

-To hell with mirrors. Her speech was getting more slurred.

-I think I better drive you home and have the car pick you up at five tomorrow morning.

-I want to go to sleep now.

-That's OK. Sleep. I will take you home.

-No, you'll just try and jump my bones all night. I'm OK, I'll take the car.

-Suit yourself, just be careful. The paparazzi are everywhere.

Arno walked to the picture window overlooking the Pacific.

-Here's what we do. I go with you in the car service to my office. I'll drive your car to your house and take the car service car home. That way you can get an extra half hour of sleep.

When the car arrived, Arno practically carried Zoë to the car.

-Take us to my office, then I'll drive her car to her home and you follow.

Then you take me home.

-Yes, Mr. Aghajanian.

Zoë was sprawled in the back seat of the limo, asleep, softly snoring.

How could such a supposedly hip guy like Ben Clarone be married to such a flake as Zoë Bontemps, thought Arno, as he pulled Zoe's dress down to cover her bush. If he's stupid enough to marry her, I should be able to fleece him for all he's got.

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Paul Austerlitz walked into The Brooklyn Cigar Store.

-What's the matter, Paul? asked Augie, the owner, you look like you ate some bad Jamaica Bay clams.

-I don't like that guy Ben Clarone. I think he's up to no good. Anatoly Gringovtch has not been friendly since that guy arrived. I think he's some drug dealer musician who is hiding out at Gringovitch's. I'll bet he thinks the police don't know where he is.

-I don't know why you would say that. Ben seems like a regular guy to me. If anything, for a musician he seems a bit of a straight arrow that's had some bad luck. Don't forget, studio musicians have to be perfect all the time, so I doubt he's a big druggie. You can't sit in the studio sight-reading music the first time perfectly, and in the correct style, if you are stoned.

-Yeah, but there is something about the guy. Look at who his estranged wife is, Zoë Bontemps. How could you give up a woman like that? She's suing him for not only divorce, but also a ton of money. And she's *rich* now! Her lawyer must know something. And I'll tell you something else; the NYPD is hip to his antics. They have twenty-four hour surveillance on him.

-Is that a fact? said Augie in a tone of disbelief.

-I know, because I'm one of the guys watching him.

-Paul, I think you are full of crap. If you were really a spy, you wouldn't admit it to me.

-Maybe I'm being clever.

-If you're clever, I'm Saint Augustine, And this Augie is a long way from halos.

Paul walked in circles around the small store.

-So, Augie, what's your read on how Gringovitch is acting these days?

-He seems the same to me. Of course, I only see him when he comes into the store, or when we get together for poker.

-But doesn't he seem different?

-He's the same great guy he's always been. Paul I think you are a little bonkers over this guy, Ben Clarone. Just because you served him a divorce subpoena doesn't mean he's a criminal, or that his childhood friend, Anatoly, and he, are into some criminal conspiracy.

-Well, I think they are, and I told the NYPD.

-You know what that makes you, Paul? A ratfink. I don't take kindly to ratfinks. Brooklyn doesn't take too well to private shamuses that are ratfinks. If I were you, I'd take a powder for a while and stop playing CIA games over a few boyhood friends, one of whom you served a divorce subpoena. You are living in an imaginary world, Paul. Since those bank robbers shot your wife, you have had more than a few screws loose. Take my advice, take a vacation. Get out of Brooklyn.

-Look, I'm sorry, Augie. I respect you and will be forever grateful for all you have done for me, but those guys are up to something. I know it and I saw it.

-Paul, take my advice. Stay out of my store. Those people are friends and customers. So are you, but you've turned on us, so take your business elsewhere.

-I'm leaving Augie, but you'll find out I know what I'm talking about.

Paul left, and knowing just where the uneven spot in the sidewalk was, caught the bottom of the store's door on it so the door would stay open. Augie came from around the counter and closed the door.

-What a putz! Augie said to the Brooklyn night.

Augie went into the store and telephoned Gringovitch's number. The answering machine answered the phone.

-Gringovitch, your cigarettes have arrived.

Augie hung up.

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-So, Anatoly, asked Ben, is that slavery or indentured servitude if you have the same black men working for you for fifty years?

-I don't know, but Gage and Tolner must be doing something right if their employees stick around that long.

-But why *black* employees? The owners are white guys aren't they? asked Ben.

-Yes, but the employees must be comfortable there. You didn't see any sullenness or hostility did you?

-No, just wondering out loud.

-I think it is a fine place to dine.

-Sure. I didn't mean to imply otherwise. I'm, just curious that black men would work as restaurant service personnel for a couple of white guys for all their working life. Gage and Tolner have been in business almost since the Civil War and just how many staff changes have they had? Probably not too many.

-Hey, look. That's Dan Arris's car parked in my spot in front of my house.

-He's probably PO'd that we weren't home.

Gringovitch made a U-turn and found a parking place across from his house.

-That was lucky, said Ben.

-I guess I live right, my friend.

As Ben and Anatoly crossed Third Street, Arris got out of his car.

-Gringovitch, Clarone, you just missed seeing Paul Austerlitz trying to break into your home.

-No shit. That little bastard DID break into my home this morning.

-I don't think he'll be a problem for a while. Some friends of mine took him for a ride out to Broad Channel, you know that enclave of crazies that live in houses on stilts on the island in Jamaica Bay on Cross Bay Boulevard. He might find that when the tide comes in, the water might be a little deeper than his nose.

-I don't think any of us heard that, said Gringovitch.

-I don't think I said it.

The men walked up to the front door of Gringovitch's house and stood silently by as he worked the keys and locks.

-How did that creep get keys to my house?

-Well, Anatoly, if he were here earlier, he probably helped himself to a set of keys in the kitchen, said Ben.

-No, I counted all the key sets after I threw him out this morning.

-But why would he try to break in again? Is he trailing Ben, looking for signs of infidelity, or has he somehow cottoned onto our art deal? asked Arris.

-What makes it rotten, added Gringovitch, is that the detective in charge of the homicides at the Artists Studios is Harold Smith, the NYPD's famous and successful art fraud gumshoe. Coincidence or what? The connection between Ben being at the SRO when the murders happened, and Harold Smith being assigned the case is a bit puzzling, no?

-All fingers point to Austerlitz if you ask me, Ben added.

-Do you think Austerlitz went up to your art studio? asked Arris.

-I don't think so, but then I caught him in the living room smoking one of my cigarettes. Who knows how long he was here. I didn't notice anything out of place in my studio.

When Gringovitch finally got the three locks open they went into the home.

-Drinks? Gringovitch asked.

-Do you have any brandy? asked Ben.

-Only the best, replied Anatoly.

-I'm good. Nothing for me, said Arris, as he walked up to the fireplace mantle and took a Balkan Sabranie cigarette from the humidor.

Anatoly brought in a cut glass crystal decanter and three snifter glasses.

-Sure you don't want to just inhale some brandy, Dan?

-Ok, pour me a finger. My blood pressure is up with that Austerlitz guy.

Anatoly poured brandy into each snifter. They all swirled the brandy in their glasses, but no one proposed a toast. Austerlitz had cast a pall over the evening.

Anatoly and Ben watched Arris smoke in silence. Finally Anatoly got up and took a cigarette from the humidor. Looking at Arris, Ben realized a strange thing about him. He seemed to be two different people. One was a steely, wily man with a quick mind and deep insights; the other was a rough muscular coarse man prone to outbursts of violence and bullying. He was like a *trompe-l'oeil* painting, first one image and then another..

Arris broke the silence.

-OK, here's what we do. Tomorrow night Ben takes the two paintings on the Pan Am flight to Nice, France. Ben, you will travel as Benjamin Adoyan. I'll leave tomorrow night for Montreal with Ben's clarinet. It is only one big one isn't it?

-Yes, it's a mother to haul around, replied Ben.

-That sounds like it would confuse the tail on Ben, interjected Gringovitch. If the tail saw Ben leave his repairman's shop with the clarinet and assumed he was headed back here or to a recording

studio, no one would be looking for Ben to exit a taxi with two paintings at JFK.

-Not bullet proof, but confusing, said Arris sniffing his brandy. Then I'll take an Air France flight from Montreal to Charles de Gaulle in Paris with the clarinet. I'll leave the clarinet with a secure source in Paris.

-Ben, when you get to Nice, you leave one painting with Yolande Esquirinchi at her restaurant, Chez Yolande, 7 Avenue Georges Clemenceau. She will have the *Liberté* portion of the 100 franc note I gave you. She will hang the picture in her restaurant, but you don't stay for that. Got that Ben? Hiding in plain sight is always a good policy.

-Yes. It worked for Edgar Allen Poe and Sherlock Holmes, added Gringovitch.

-I don't want you to write anything down. Remember, Yolande Esquirinchi at Chez Yolande, 7 Avenue Georges Clemenceau, right off Avenue Jean Medicin. Then you walk the few blocks to Gare de Nice and take the train to Gare St Charles in Marseilles. You could walk, but I suggest you take a taxi to Yousef Al Sidran, 21bis Rue de la République. Sidran is on the top floor. Sorry there's no elevator. He will present you with "the people" part of the 100 franc note. In both cases, you do not hand over the paintings until you are sure the parts fit perfectly, I mean perfectly together. If they don't, then it is a trap. Someone is onto us. You will have to figure a way out, but get out fast. Remember, Ben, and this is important, you are carrying the forgeries, so if you have to lose one, it is not the worst thing.

Ben looked at Arris and took a sniff of his brandy.

-What do you mean a trap, Arris? asked Gringovitch.

-Ben, show Anatoly your part of the 100 franc note.

Ben took out his wallet and handed Anatoly his half of the 100 franc note with the picture of Delacroix.

-Notice, said Ben, that it is not a regular pinking shears. Arris has filed the teeth so they have a unique pattern.

-Good work, Ben.

Gringovitch handed the partial note back to Ben.

-Now, when you have a complete 100 franc note, continued Arris, you take a train to Paris. By then it will be an overnight train. The ONLY thing you will have in your possession linking you to these transactions is the three-part 100 franc note. When you arrive a Gare de Lyon in Paris you will probably have to kill some time before the next *rendezvous*. There are a couple of cheap, one-star hotels on rue Chaligny, near Anatoly's apartment on rue Charenton. They don't ask questions and they are used to travelers crashing for a few hours.

-I've stayed in one or two of them when I would visit Anatoly in Paris. Regular hot-sheet places. The working girls can keep you up all night. Should be quiet except for the cleaning staff in the morning.

-I like that Ben, hot-sheet places, replied Arris. Sometime after noon, Arris continued, which will be noon Friday, you will go to the Pont Neuf, right bank, to the first "Bouquiniste" — you know the green box guys who sell books, post cards and posters. You'll see a vintage poster advertising your concert in Paris in 1973. The patron's name is Miguel Martine. Ask to buy the poster. He will say one hundred francs. You hand over the three-parts of the 100 franc note. He will put the pieces together. He will then give you an address where you will find your clarinet. What is it called?

-Contrabass clarinet, replied Ben. But what if one of the deliveries is compromised and I don't have all the parts of the 100 franc note. How do I get my contrabass clarinet? Contrabass clarinets are not common, and all wood ones are very rare. It's not like I could rent one, even in Paris where they are made.

-I have to think about that Ben, replied Arris. I have a fallback plan, but I don't have all the details. I will give you a contact when we cross paths at JFK tomorrow evening.

-If somehow the deal is compromised, Gringovitch added, it really puts Ben in a bind. As far as French immigration control is concerned, there is no Ben Clarone in France. He will be in a similar position to where he was last Saturday night, a non-person.

-He'll still have both passports. Until he gets his contrabass clarinet, he is Benjamin Adoyan. When he finally gets his instrument, he is instantly Ben Clarone with a gig in Monte Carlo.

- Let's assume everything works out as planned, continued Arris. When you have that address, you will be Ben Clarone. You will have your clarinet and also get an initial five thousand francs, or about one thousand dollars. You can fly back to Nice easily and be there for a late dinner. If I remember, there is a three-thirty flight from Orly that will get you to Nice around five-thirty. Tell your Monaco friends that you will be coming in from Paris on Friday night. I'm sure they will meet you at the airport and take you to your lodging.

-That's a lot of stuff to remember and it's all foreign, remarked Anatoly.

-Listen to this, said Ben, reciting back the itinerary exactly as Dan Arris had said it. I'm a musician, I remember things very well.

- Ok, Ben, where do I find you and the contrabass clarinet tomorrow afternoon?

-I will be at Frompini's Woodwinds on 46th Street between Seventh and Sixth Avenues, closer to Seventh. There's a big saxophone sign extending from the second floor.

-You have to be done by four o'clock. A livery service car, Brighton Car Service, will be waiting for you. There will be two paintings in the car. When you get to JFK take the paintings, but leave the contrabass. I will get in the car and take your contrabass to Montreal and then Paris. You get on Pam Am flight 82 as Benjamin Adoylan. Keep your Ben Clarone passport well out of sight. You will be in Nice by ten Thursday morning. Then you have to hustle.

-Jesus, Dan, you make it sound like a John le Carré spy novel, said Anatoly.

-Well, it would have been simple until that Austerlitz guy got his nose into this.

-Let's not talk about that, said Anatoly.

-One more thing, Clarone, said Arris. If anyone asks, you are just a courier for Anatoly Gringovitch delivering paintings to some

people who bought his paintings. The appropriate paperwork is with the paintings.

-Got it. I might enjoy this, though not having enough time to even look over the music I have to play will be difficult.

-I thought you were the best.

-I am, but that doesn't make it any easier.

-Ok. Now you know the drill. I'm outta here. Ben, I see you at four sharp tomorrow afternoon in front of Frompini Woodwinds. Anatoly, I believe you leave for Rome on Friday?

-I'm on standby for Friday but confirmed for Saturday.

-Well, when we meet again we can toast to a job well done.

Arris put on his coat and let himself out the front door.

-Ben, I'll bet you never imagined this string of events when you landed in New York City four nights ago.

-No, but it sure takes my mind off being ditched by a wife and losing most of my stuff, said Ben with a measure of sarcasm.

-Do you know the penalties for international art fraud?

-No, do you?

-Sort of, but don't think about it. You're just the delivery boy. And don't forget, all the buyers are also accessories for knowingly purchasing stolen art. And, my friend, those Gringovitch paintings are authentic and worth some serious money. The forgeries are *pentimento*, the gold hidden underneath

To be continued

