

Five Million Yen: Chapter 22

by Daniel Harris

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Paul Austerlitz left Augie's Brooklyn Cigar Store and headed down Third Street towards Gringovitch's whitestone home. Austerlitz knew that Ben Clarone and Anatoly Gringovitch were up to something, and he was determined to find out exactly what. He was on the opposite side of the street from Gringovitch's home. The crack house that had been gutted by fire was still boarded up. It had been that way for two years. There was no indication that the owners were going to sell or rebuild. Austerlitz decided to investigate just what conditions were like in the burned out shell. It would make a perfect location from which to watch Gringovitch's home without being conspicuous.

Since the houses on Third Street were attached to each other, it was not possible to get into the back of the house except perhaps by entering from Second Street, *if* one of the houses on Second Street had a walkway to the rear. None of the nearby houses on Third Street had a walkway to the back yard. Before trying to gain access from the back, Austerlitz climbed the steps to the front door of the burned house. There was a padlock on a chain that went through the plywood door and around the doorframe. There were posted signs against trespass, and warnings of dangerous conditions. Austerlitz pulled on the door. The chain rattled through the hole in the plywood and the door swung open. Austerlitz pulled out his keys and shined his small keychain flashlight into the void.

The air was foul with the stink of wet burned wood, rat urine and unwashed bodies. The little light showed that the floor was intact

and there were fresh footprints leading toward the back of the house. The house was a mirror image of Gringovitch's house, with the living room on the left instead of the right when you entered. Paul went into the living room. He noticed holes in the ceiling, but the floor seemed sound. There were probably rats everywhere, but Paul didn't spot any, though rat scat was abundant. The broken glass of the front window was covered by plywood. There was a small crack between two of the plywood sheets that afforded Paul a perfect view of the front of Gringovitch's house.

-Ah, this will serve my purposes perfectly, Paul said to himself.

Paul checked the rest of the first floor for a chair, but all the furniture had been removed. There was a forty-gallon trashcan in the burned kitchen. Paul emptied it on the floor and moved it to the front window. He turned the can upside down and it made a perfect seat for peering out the crack between the plywood sheets.

Looking out, Paul saw that there were no lights on at Gringovitch's home. He decided to cross Third Street and break into Gringovitch's house. He needed to thoroughly examine the paintings in Gringovitch's top floor studio.

He carefully closed the front door of the burned hulk and reinserted the chain into the hole in the boarded-up door. Things were definitely looking more in Paul's favor. If he could discover exactly what Gringovitch and Clarone were up to, he might have some juicy information for Detective Harold Smith; better yet, some serious blackmail opportunities. Zoë's lawyer, Arno Aghajanian, would be thrilled if Austerlitz discovered that Clarone was involved in some high stakes fraud. Aghajanian would have Clarone's balls in a vice and squeeze all the money that jerk Clarone had out of him. If it involved art, he could get Harold Smith on the case and really put it to Clarone and Gringovitch. No matter what, Paul could see serious money coming his way.

Paul checked the street and saw an elderly woman walking a small dog halfway down the block. He cut across Third Street. Suddenly he stopped.

Did he just hear a chain rattling? He turned and looked, but there was no one behind him, or anyone on the porch of the burned house.

-Paul, he told himself, you're getting jumpy in your old age. Keep cool and calm.

Paul checked the street again. He noticed up on the corner that Augie was pulling down the shutters on his store. The neighborhood seemed quiet and peaceful for nine-thirty at night.

Paul jumped the gate in front of Gringovitch's front sidewalk and quickly went up to the front door. He rang the bell. Nothing.

Paul bent down to start working the locks. Just as the first lock clicked open, two large men appeared on the porch.

-Looks like you could use some light, Austerlitz, said one of the men in a heavy Russian accent, or perhaps you prefer the dark?

-What the...

The smaller of the two big men hit Austerlitz on the side of the head with a blackjack. Paul folded like a wet newspaper. The bigger man added a kick to the groin and one to the solar plexus. Paul was not awake for those.

The two men hogtied Paul's hands to his ankles using some plastic cable ties and tossed him into the trunk of a Lincoln Continental Mark IV.

The two men drove in silence to Howard Beach. They parked behind a warehouse and opened the trunk. Paul was still out cold. The smaller of the two men took out a switchblade and cut off Paul's clothing. They hurled the clothes into a nearby Waste Management dumpster.

The men drove to the Cross Bay Bridge and Broad Channel. When they arrived at Broad Channel, they turned down a lane to a row of houses on stilts. Three Vietnamese men sat smoking strong cigarettes and cleaning fish in front of one of the houses.

-Hey, Ruskie man, what you got for us tonight? called out the oldest man.

-Something to put in your bait trap.

-Alive or dead? Asked the youngest of the three men.

-Alive, but asleep.

-You want full treatment? the oldest of the three asked.

-Don't kill him, but give him the good traditional Hanoi Hilton service. Be especially sure you only speak Vietnamese in his presence. He spent three months in a water cell in Vietnam. He will be a basket case after a couple of days.

-The water is getting colder; maybe one day will be enough. The older man said.

You don't want him dead do you?

-No, just frightened and crazy. When you have him babbling to himself, leave him on the beach at Coney Island.

The two Russians opened the trunk. Paul was still out cold. The big Russian picked up Paul and dropped him on the wet mud. The smaller Russian took some duct tape from the car. He used the tape to blindfolded Paul and gag his mouth.

It sounded to the big Russian that the three Vietnamese were bickering among themselves.

-Chien, let's not fight about money, said the smaller Russian in perfect Vietnamese. There is enough in this envelope to pay for the finest Hanoi Hilton room.

-Ky says this job is too risky, replied Chien.

-Ky, this guy is soft, he'll snap in less than a day, said the Russian. Keep the blindfold and gag on until you deposit him on the beach. You have to hold him until Friday.

The three Vietnamese huddled together and whispered to each other.

-Show us the envelope, said Chien.

The Vietnamese speaking Russian gave the envelope to Chien who handed it to the one named Ky. Ky counted the money.

-He can check into the hotel and we will release him Friday, announced Ky, a tight smile on his face. Do you want to see his room?

-Sure.

-Bring the guest, said Chien with perfect sarcasm.

The three Vietnamese and the two Russians walked out a narrow pier. The bigger Russian carried the unconscious Paul.

The one named Dung, who sported a horrible bullet scar on his cheek, shined a powerful flashlight down into the water. There was a wooden cage with wire mesh around it. Inside the cage were hundreds of eels.

-He won't be lonely, said the big Russian in Russian to no one in particular.

The smaller Russian took out his switchblade and cut the cable ties holding Austerlitz's wrists and ankles. He attached a new cable tie to the wrists in front of Paul's body.

-He's not going to feel good when he wakes up, said Dung pointing to one of Paul's swollen testicles.

-He will be grateful for the cold water, said Chein.

-Well, my Asian brothers, we have other appointments to keep. We trust you will be good hosts, said the Vietnamese speaking Russian.

-Xin chào.

-Xin chào.

The two Russians got back into their car and backed out onto the highway.

-I love wrecking a small-time dick, said the big Russian.

-He should never have been playing in the big leagues, replied the other. This work makes me hungry. Let's get a couple dozen oysters over in Sheepshead Bay.

-You're driving, said the big Russian.

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Dung barked out some order and a young Vietnamese girl dragged out a plastic cooler full of crushed ice.

-Put a shovel full of ice on his balls, ordered Dung.

-Yes, father.

The girl took a scoop and covered Paul's crotch with the ice.

Ky went over to Paul and cut the cable ties on his wrists. Ky pulled Paul's elbows behind his back and tied them tightly. Russians don't know how to tie-up someone, he sneered.

Paul started to come to. He was groaning and tried to put his hands on his swollen, ice covered genitals, but couldn't move his arms. He moaned under the gag.

-Ky started flicking off the ice from Paul's groin with his knife blade. When I get to the end of the ice, I'm going to fillet his balls with one quick slice of this knife, announced Ky in Vietnamese.

-He will be happy to be rid of his aching balls, joked Dung.

-Enough of this tease, ordered Chien, walking over to the two men. Take this Yankee trash and put him in the water cage.

Paul apparently understood enough of what he heard to start writhing on the pier. As much as it hurt, he started thrashing his legs. The ice scattered and he tried to roll over to protect himself. The three men and the girl watched him in a most dispassionate manner.

-We should cut his balls and eat them, said the girl in Vietnamese.

-Lili, watch your mouth. Go into the house. Get a rope and a life jacket.

The girl left and returned a few minutes later with twenty feet of heavy rope and a life jacket.

Dung pinched the back of Paul's neck. He went limp. Dung and Ky untied Paul's arms and put the life jacket on Paul. Then Ky and Chien hogtied Paul's feet to his neck behind his back. If Paul straightened his legs he would choke himself. All Paul wanted to do was curl up in a fetal position and stop the pain in his belly. The rope held him almost in the exact opposite of a fetal position, but his arms and hands had been retied behind his back so he could not cradle his sweetmeats.

Paul could hear the sound of small waves striking the pier. Fear competed with pain in his solar plexus. He knew that sound, and he knew enough Vietnamese to know they were discussing his fate. To a foreigner it sounded like they were arguing, but then you would hear laughter. What were they doing? This wasn't Vietnam but New York. Or was it?

Ky took a long pole and opened the eel cage.

Dung and Chien grabbed Paul by the armpits and flipped him into the eel cage.

-Float, Yankee dog. Float for your lousy spying life, said Dung in English.

Paul was floating on his back. He was panicking, thinking about drowning in this cage. His mind flashed back to Vietnam and his days and nights in the water cage. This time at least he had a life jacket. But his arms and feet were tied. Worse, his feet were tied to his neck. Any movement of his legs tightened the noose knot on his neck. He had a mind-numbing headache and his testicles and gut were in screaming pain. He could feel fish or worse touching his body.

Paul could smell the men's strong French cigarettes. They seemed to have moved away as their voices were fainter and he could hear that they were doing some kind of work. Occasionally there would be a laugh, but mostly the men were working in silence, filleting their evening's catch for tomorrow's market.

After awhile, Dung of the gruesome facial scar came to the eel cage and kicked the top of the cage closed. It landed on Paul's head and knocked him out. He floated with his nose through one of the loops in the wire mesh. He came to almost immediately. It was then that he realized that the water was not warm, like in Vietnam, but cool. He could be dead from hypothermia in a few hours.

Sleep, Yankee dog, Dung ordered in English.

A few of the eels started to attach themselves to Paul's body.

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By the time Ben had put in two hours practicing his contrabass and had selected an appropriate wardrobe for his role as a courier of art: jeans, flannel shirt, leather jacket and running shoes, it was two in the morning.

He went downstairs and into Gringovitch's office. From his wallet he took the piece of telephone directory paper on which he had written Jean-Claude Lyon's, Orchestra Manager of the Monte Carlo Orchestra, telephone number. He dialed the number.

-Allo, bonjour.

-Jean-Claude, ici Ben Clarone.

-Ah, Ben. I was worried you would not telephone, Jean-Claude replied in English.

-It's not too early in the morning is it?

-Oh no, Ben. International orchestra managers never sleep. Especially waiting for a major soloist to confirm an engagement.

-You can rest easy. I now have a schedule. It seems I will be in Paris and come to Nice on Friday evening on the afternoon flight from Orly. I know it is cutting it close, but it is the best I can do. Is it OK?

-Ben, I wish you could be here a day earlier, but if that is the best you can do, so be it.

-I will call you from Paris when I have my travel plans confirmed. I have to see the guys at Selmer about my contrabass, which has suffered after my three-month tour.

-I understand perfectly. But for your information, I have arranged with Arno Donax's wife, that you can borrow his instrument as a backup. It was not with him on his motorcycle when he crashed.

-How is he after the accident?

-Alive, but seriously hurt and in an induced coma. He is in intensive care and is still boarder-line for recovery. Brain injuries can turn bad very quickly.

-All my prayers and thoughts for his recovery are with him. He and I, though rivals, were the best of friends. I should visit him when I'm there.

-Ben, you will have a very busy schedule for the first few days. Hausenstockmann is very nervous about the situation and wants to rehearse with you *tout suite*. My wife, Claudia, has had to use all her considerable French charms on him to keep the faith in your arrival.

-She can charm me all she wants, you lucky dog.

-Ah, sounds like a healthy happy Ben. By the way, we have arranged to put you up at Villa Arson in Nice. We will rent you a car. You will have your own atelier, so you can practice any time of the day or night. The hotels in Monte Carlo can be troublesome for musicians.

-That all sounds good. Thank you for your good planning. It is late and I have to be up early in the morning. I will call you from Paris. À bientôt. mon ami.

-Beises, Ben. A bientôt.

-Ciao

-Ciao.

Ben hung up. The phone rang almost immediately.

-Allo?

-*Yolande a été compromise.*

The party hung up.

Ben put the phone down. Gringovitch came into his office.

-Who was that Ben?

-There was no one on the line. Must have been some false ring.

-Yeah, that happens sometimes after international calls, remarked Gringovitch.

-Well, I have to be at Frompini's shop to get that horn fixed early. Thank you for that great dinner at Gage and Tolner. I hope whatever Arris's people did to Austerlitz is not going to compromise our deal.

-Arris is a smart guy. I think whatever it is, they will end up scaring the bejesus out of Austerlitz, but he will stop shadowing you. Once you are on the plane, Austerlitz is history.

-Will I see you tomorrow morning?

-Yes, I'll have to give you all the papers and Arris will stop by early to get the paintings. What about breakfast at the Greek's at seven?

-Sounds like a plan. I feel like I'm already back on the road. Stay up until two, get up at six.

-Sleep tight, Ben. I'm crashing soon myself.

Ben climbed up to the third-floor bedroom. He undressed and lay down on the bed. If Yolande was compromised, did that mean that he could not get the *liberté* portion of the hundred-franc note? And if not, how would he get his contrabass clarinet in Paris if he didn't have a complete note for Miguel Martinez at the *bouquiniste* at Pont Neuf in Paris? Martinez had the address where Ben could reclaim

his contrabass, which would allow him to change his identity from Benjamin Adoylan back to Ben Clarone. Worse, would Yousef Al Sidran in Marseilles demand to see the two portions of the hundred franc note that Ben should have?

Sleep did not come.

To be continued

