

Five Million Yen: Chapter 23

by Daniel Harris

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Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill sat in his squad car, which was parked on 54th Street in front of Bright Star Recording Studios. He had just finished the second of two jelly donuts and was spiking his coffee with three packets of sugar. He had a yellow legal pad resting on the steering wheel and was trying to make some sense of the murders at the Artists Studios. The motive appeared to center around a five million yen check that Ben Clarone had on his person when he checked into the Artists Studio.

Mulvihill notated five million yen in scientific notation, 5×10^6 ¥, which he thought was a clever salute to Sister Barbara, named after the patron saint of mathematicians, his math teacher at St. Xavier Academy. His best skills in high school were math and wrestling. Police work came naturally and after serving in the navy he joined the NYPD and rapidly rose through the ranks by stint of hard police work and a natural instinct for understanding the criminal mind. The only thing that kept him from promotion to the level of Lieutenant, was his bullying demeanor and that he appeared to fit the stereotype of "scratch a cop, find a crook," though in fact, those who had worked with him, knew him to have the highest standards of integrity for a cop. The District Attorney's office loved him when he brought a case, because there were never any questionable details, or missing links. He had only lost one case in twelve years and that was on an evidence screw-up by the DA's office.

Mulvihill made a list:

The Murdered:

David Seltzer, resident of Artists Studios, beaten to death with a 1941 Conn "Naked Lady" tenor saxophone.

Suspect: 1) LeRoi Burr, aka "Big Stinger"

Suspect: 2) Victor "Shadow" Ruiz

Carl Swan, resident of Artists Studios, beaten to death.

Suspect: 1) LeRoi Burr, aka "Big Stinger"

Suspect: 2) Victor "Shadow" Ruiz

Rita Olivera, drug addict, prostitute and resident of Artists Studios, beaten to death. Daughter of super in Ben Clarone's former residence on W. 71st Street.

Suspect: 1) LeRoi Burr, aka "Big Stinger"

Suspect: 2) Victor "Shadow" Ruiz

Suspect: 3) Ben Clarone, resident of Artists Studios

David Sketis, Night clerk at Artists Studios, beaten to death Monday morning.

Suspect: 1) LeRoi Burr, aka "Big Stinger"

Suspect: 2) Victor "Shadow" Ruiz

Clarone was with Lt Harold Smith & D-S Mulvihill at time of murder.

Rodney Stickins, aka Adonis, reception desk clerk at Artists Studios, tortured and hanged

Suspect: 1) LeRoi Burr, aka "Big Stinger"

Suspect: 2) Victor "Shadow" Ruiz

Clarone was known to be in Brooklyn at time of murder.

The Suspects and Motives:

LeRoi Burr, aka "Big Stinger"

Known pimp, drug dealer and small-time hood with long arrest record. Has record of violence and forceful intimidation in prison and with his male and female prostitutes. Apparently was tipped off

by Rodney Stickins about Clarone's 5x106 ¥ check. Rita Olivera was in the stable of his prostitutes. Rita O. apparently went to Ben Clarone's assistance incurring Burr's wrath. Result: dead prostitute. Seltzer and Swan may have been collateral damage. Burr punished them for helping Clarone. May have murdered Sketis when Sketis wouldn't hand over Clarone's ID's and the 5x106 ¥ check from Artists Studio's safe. Probably tortured and murdered Rodney Stickins, or had him tortured and murdered, for hiding the whereabouts of 5x106 ¥ check and Clarone's ID's and/or felt Stickins had double-crossed him.

Victor Ruiz, aka "Shadow"

Known career thief with a long record as pickpocket, picklock and cat burglar. Quickly makes himself indispensable to alpha males in prison and on the street.

A confederate and bagman for Burr. Not an imposing physical presence, but he has a black belt in karate and the equivalent in street fighting. Fast with a knife. Likes to assume guises and uses costume and make-up. Parents were itinerant small-time circus performers: performing magic tricks, knife throwing, wire walking and aerial acts. Father, Mexican; mother, Hungarian. Father accidentally killed Victor's mother in a blindfolded knife-throwing act. Victor stood in for his mother at the next show and for the rest of the run. The next year, Victor killed his father when he was the blindfolded thrower and his father the target to be missed. No charges in either case. Victor probably accessory to murders of Seltzer, Swan, Sketis and Stickins. May be sole perp in death of Rita Olivera.

Ben Clarone, musician, lost all his possessions and home when wife left him while on tour, his 5x106 ¥ check & his ID's stolen at Artists Studios.

Known to have a temper. Divorce papers filed include extreme mental and physical cruelty. Rita Olivera was his former super's daughter. There are two possible revenge motives: she stole his clothes, ID's and the 5x106 ¥ check from his room while he was in

shower on orders from Burr. She also may have been a revenge target against her father who evicted Clarone in *absentia*. Case against Clarone for other murders is weak, either because there's no motive, or he was under police surveillance at the time of the murders.

What Mulvihill couldn't figure was why Burr and Ruiz thought they could cash a 5x106 ¥ check from a Japanese governmental agency. How stupid could they be? Even if they had Clarone's ID's, it would be slim to nothing chance. 5x106 ¥ was more than 15K\$. Hardly enough to kill someone over. But why didn't Clarone have the money wired to his checking account? Probably because his only checking account was a joint account with his wife, Zoë Bontemps, whom he knew was about to, or had, split. Until they nabbed Burr and/or Ruiz and put the squeeze on them, it would be difficult to find the answers.

Finding Burr and Ruiz was paramount. Also, where was the 5x106 ¥ check? Whoever had that check had blood on their hands. Mulvihill wondered if Lt. Smith had asked Clarone if he had stopped the check, or made arrangements for a replacement check. It was known that Clarone had made international calls from Grand Central Station. Mulvihill was ready to assume even a klutz like Clarone had told his Japanese employers to stop that check and to wire money directly to a bank account in New York. They also knew that Clarone had gotten a replacement passport and probably a driver's license. He had enough ID and New York banking history to open a new account

Mulvihill put the legal pad down on the passenger front seat. He got out of the car and put the remains of his four AM breakfast in a street trashcan. As he was walking back to the car, he heard the radio crackling. He stretched and touched his toes ten times.

-Sitting in cars is really bad for the back, he thought to himself.

Three musicians came out of the Bright Star Recording Studios. They greeted Mulvihill.

-Officer, you haven't seen a livery service car pull up here have you? asked a musician with a saxophone gig bag.

-Not since I've been here. When did you call?

-About a half hour ago, the musician with a big acoustic bass replied.

-Was it a Brooklyn car service?

-Yes. We all live in Park Slope, Brooklyn. We were doing music for a low-budget movie.

-It might be some time, there is construction on the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges. Was Ben Clarone on this gig with you fellas?

-Are you kidding, officer?

-No, just asking.

-He's the *crème de la crème* of studio guys. He doesn't need these cheesy low-pay studio gigs.

-He's really that good?

-Officer, he's the best there is, said a young trumpet player.

-Are you looking for him? asked the bass player.

-No, he was a crime victim last Saturday night and worked here on Monday.

-That means he's back in town. Great, my brother is the drummer in his band, *Pieces of Eight*. He'll be happy to know there will be some gigs for the holidays.

-Holidays? Are you talkin' Halloween? asked the sax man.

-Officer, you know what's funny? The cheap film we were recording the soundtrack for, stars Ben's wife, Zoë Bontemps. It is a documentary of how *I'd Rather Not* went from off-off-off Broadway to TV hit. In the stage production, she's almost naked for the entire play. Zoë's one hot babe. I guess if you're a hot player, you get the hot women.

Mulvihill kept council to himself about Ben's marital status. No sense ruining their fantasies.

A black 1965 Chevy Impala turned the corner off of 10th Avenue and pulled up next to the group. One of you Ramirez? asked the driver.

Mulvihill recognized the driver as Reynard Lobo, NYPD's undercover man in the Artists Studios SRO.

-I am replied the bass player. It's my bass, these two guys and me. We're all going to the same address in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

-OK. The bass goes in first and then the rest of you will have to put your cases in the trunk and squeeze in as best you can, the driver said.

The driver got out and opened the trunk. There was nothing except a piece of clothesline in the trunk. Not even a spare tire.

-You know, I pick-up a musician from this studio now and again. You might know him. His name's Ben something. Always has a ton of horns with him.

-Lives up on west 71st Street? asked the bass player.

-That's the guy.

-His name's Ben Clarone. One of the top, top guys. We just did some music for a film where his wife, Zoë Bontemps, has the lead role, she doesn't wear many clothes in the film either. She's some kinda babe!

-Lobo could almost feel the trumpet player's heat.

When they had all squeezed in, the car took off up 54th Street.

Mulvihill looked at his watch. It was four-thirty in the morning. I don't know when those guys start their day, but finishing at this hour makes for a long, long day, thought Mulvihill.

The radio in the prowler car bleated out his code.

-Mulvihill, here.

-Detective, Vice just picked up LeRoi Burr in East Harlem. They're taking him down to the Tombs.

-Does Lt. Harold Smith know yet? asked Mulvihill.

-He's not answering his telephone.

-Tell the DA's office to let us know what the arrest is and what the plea is. He's a prime suspect in a couple of murders.

-Yes, sir, replied the dispatcher.

-I'm sure he has good lawyers, so my orders are they watch their manners in dealing with him. I suggest cooling him off for four hours. He's dangerous, so keep him in solitary.

-10-4, Detective Mulvihill. Cooling and solitary.

-10-4.

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Ben could not sleep. He had to call Lt. Smith tomorrow morning. He had to get Sal Frompini to tweak his contrabass clarinet. He had to meet Dan Arris at JFK and swap his contrabass for the two paintings he was to deliver. Unfortunately he had just heard that Yolande Esquirinchi, recipient of one of the paintings and holder of a third of the 100 franc note, which he would need to claim his contrabass clarinet in Paris, had been compromised. He wasn't sure what that meant, but he was not about to tell Arris or Gringovitch...not yet. He had to make sure he had both sets of passports and ID's: Benjamin Clarone and Benjamin Adoyan. He would be traveling as Benjamin Adoyan, the painter Arshile Gorky's family name.

Ironically, he would be delivering two paintings that looked like two *different* Gringovitch paintings, but underneath the Gringovitch paintings were near identical copies of *one* of Gorky's last paintings, the June 1948 *Unfaithful Wife*. A further irony was that Ben's wife, Zoë Bontemps, was incredibly unfaithful in the last year or so. She rarely got home before dawn and then looked like she had enough orgasms to mellow her completely out. A couple of his buddies had seen her entwined in some of her fellow thespians at after-hours clubs. Who knows what she does with network TV heavies. She and her Hollywood celebrity lawyer, Arno Aghajanian, were suing him for five hundred thousand dollars. All he had was about two hundred bucks and a couple of musical instruments. Meanwhile, she was a big TV star who had a seven-figure contract with NBC.

Ben also had to worry about his musical career. If he blew this concerto gig in Monte Carlo, it would cost him reputation and income for some time. There was a lot of pressure from all sides.

Now the easy courier gig that would net him twenty grand was about to blow up on him and his partners, Dan Arris and Anatoly Gringovitch. If Arris had that amateur spook, Paul Austerlitz, whacked, then he would really be in trouble, because the NYPD and Arno Aghajanian were using Austerlitz to spy on him. If Austerlitz disappeared, he might be suspect number one.

He still wasn't completely clear of charges of murder at the Artists Studios. He hoped Smith and Mulvihill would solve the murder cases, so he could scratch that off his list of worries. He had to time the call to Smith in a few hours so that he would leave a message and not have to talk to Smith. He knew Smith could smell a lie through a phone line.

Ben got out of bed and looked down on Third Street. There was a black 1965 Chevy Impala double-parked the wrong way in front of the gutted crack house.

-Damn! That has to be Reynard Lobo. Here I am standing in the window. I'm sure he has some binoculars and is looking directly at me.

Ben slowly stepped back from the window. He could see the car and the front of the crack house. A man exited the crack house. He fiddled with the chains on the front door and stood by the Chevy. It sure looked like Reynard Lobo. Lobo looked up at Gringovitch's house for what seemed as long as Ben could hold his breath. Lobo got in the Chevy did a full tire-squealing u-turn and headed back toward Manhattan.

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From his hiding place in the shadows on East 115th Street, Victor Ruiz watched four police officers muscle LeRoi Burr into a police cruiser. There must have been six police cars pulled up in front of the tenement. Ruiz knew that Burr would be faced with murder one, and Burr would rat him out. Victor would be the subject of a citywide manhunt. At the moment he had to be a lizard and remain frozen in this spot. Any movement and the cops would spot him. As soon as it was safe to move he had to get out of New York City.

An hour after the last police car left the scene, Victor ventured out on the street. There were a few locals, but no apparent police or street eyes. He headed up to the New Haven railroad station at 125th Street. He would get on the train and go to New Haven, where he would buy a ticket for Boston. From there he would fly to Mexico City.

Standing on the platform waiting for the train, Victor Ruiz pulled the five million yen check out of his tuxedo pants pocket. There was Simon Sketis's blood on it.

-What in hell's name did we think we would do with this check? Ruiz thought to himself. That fast talking Stickins had convinced us it was worth fifteen grand. Well Stickins got the final big screw. Bet he was happy when his neck cracked.

As the Connecticut-bound train pulled into the station, Ruiz dropped the check onto the tracks. It floated down to the street below. Five dead people, a ruined saxophone, no pay-off and the rest of his life on the run, calculated Victor. Some jobs weren't worth the trouble.

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The two Vietnamese fishermen, Ky and Dung, pulled a freezing-and-blue Paul Austerlitz from the eel tank. There were nearly a dozen eels attached to his body. Ky cut the rope restraints from Paul's nearly inert body. They pulled him to his feet and drag-led him to a small shack. It was a fish smoke shack. Paul was shivering and welcomed the smoky heat. The cold water had reduced the swelling in his testicle and relieved some of the pain of the kick to the solar plexus. Still, the injuries to his testicles and his abdomen caused wincing pain when he breathed. The lump behind his left ear was the size of a lemon and painful to the touch.

Paul slumped to the floor where there was less smoke, but also less heat. It was warmer than the eel tank and much drier. He started to warm up. As his skin warmed, he felt things sucking on his flesh. He grabbed at one and pulled it off. Its teeth took a quarter-sized circle of flesh. He flung the creature at the heat source and could hear it sizzle on a fire.

-I have to get this blindfold off, Paul said to himself. The problem was that the tape went over the bump on his head. When his fingers finally found the end of the tape, the slightest pressure of pulling the tape caused searing pain.

-What did the doctor always say about removing bandages? One quick, complete pull.

Paul tried, but realized that he was taped both ways, so the only way to remove the blindfold or the gag was with a knife.

He pulled off another eel that was half under the lifejacket. He screamed into the gag. Again there was a heartening sizzle when the creature landed in the fire.

Paul curled up in a fetal position and began to slowly rock back and forth on the floor. The life jacket was a cushioning kindness, his torturers seemed to have forgotten. Paul was moaning and crying. He would interrupt his sobbing, and scream as hard as he could into the gag. No one could hear him. His head buzzed and he could only hear Vietnamese orders. He yelled his name, rank and serial number into the gag. Each time he repeated his name, rank and serial number, he could hear Vietnamese laughing. The buzz of name, rank, serial number and Vietnamese laughter made him delirious. He started to laugh into the gag.

Knock yourself out, Paul. Knock yourself out, a voice in his head cried out.

With all his will power he smashed the bump on his head against the floor.

A merciful numbness descended as he passed out.

To be continued.

