

Five Million Yen: Chapter 24

by Daniel Harris

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Wednesday, October 27, 1976, 8AM. Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Ben and Gringovitch left the Apollo restaurant on Seventh Avenue in Park Slope.

-Jesus, Ben, how can you eat so much breakfast? asked Gringovitch.

-It powers me all day. Listen, sometimes you get in a studio gig and you're there for eight or ten hours with no food. A good breakfast gets you through.

-If I drank as much as you, I couldn't eat a breakfast like that.

-Anatoly, you are an amateur. Musicians know how to drink and still perform. As Zoë says, "You and your musician friends drink in industrial quantities."

-She's got that right. Ben, look, here's the deal. I will give you papers that will prove to any law enforcement types that you are a *bona fide* courier of my art. That includes the customs guys in Nice, France. There shouldn't be a problem, but if there is, and they confiscate the paintings, call me ASAP. I'll get my Italian and French lawyers on it ASAP

Ben was not happy hearing all those ASAP's.

-Listen, Anatoly, if all goes according to plan, no issues. If it's messed up, I guess I'm on my own, and it will jeopardize my gig in Monte Carlo. If I can't get the other two parts of the 100 franc note, I'm in a sinking ship without a lifeboat.

-Ben, I'm sure Arris has a plan. If it all falls through, don't forget, there is no deadline for the sale of the paintings. The demand will

always be there. So move ahead with the concert gig in Monte Carlo and we will solve the problems and you will play your gigs and still deliver the paintings.

-Easy for you to say Anatoly, but I'm stuck with maybe two paintings held in customs and no horn to play my gig.

-Ben, you worry too much. If you get into France with the two paintings, the battle is half over. You play your gig on some instrument, even a rental, and you will eventually deliver the paintings

-Slava, my wooden contrabass is one of the most rare instruments in the world. It's not like renting a trumpet, or even an authentic Stradivarius violin. I will be seriously SOL.

-SOL?

-Shit out of luck.

-I tell you, Ben, you worry too much. If it makes you feel better, I'll tell Arris your concerns.

When they arrived at Gringovitch's home, Gringovitch gave Ben all the paperwork he would need to prove his role as an art courier.

-Listen, Ben. I will come to your concert with the money for your part. I know you will do the job, no matter what problems come up. Just remember, time is not a problem. The longer it takes, the higher the price. Be cool. Think. Be patient. Keep your mouth shut.

-Easy for you to say. I'll be traveling under an assumed name, passport and ID. That can be as treacherous as walking on black ice.

-Ben, just keep cool. I know you're smart. Don't let the last few days undermine your confidence.

-OK, but I hope the NYPD doesn't have a tail on me, or try to stop me from leaving the country.

-Just be a disinterested courier. You could care less about your mission. It's only a job to you.

Ben grabbed his contrabass clarinet case, backpack and headed out to the subway. He checked his papers and still had the authorization from the DA's office for replacement driver's license and passport. He decided to stop in downtown Brooklyn to get a replacement driver's license. He took the F train to Borough Hall

He was not happy carrying the contrabass case to Livingston Street, but was happy to see a short line at the DOT office. He presented his replacement authorization to the line monitor. He was sent to a special window.

-Mr. Clarone, do you have a permanent New York State address?

-Yes. He gave her Gringovitch's address in Park Slope.

-Fill out this form, and come back to this window.

Ben filled out the form and returned to the window. In ten minutes, he left the building with a valid temporary New York State driver's license that was good for a month, or until he received a permanent license.

Ben checked for anyone tailing him. It looked like he was OK. He took the F train from Borough Hall and got off at 47-50 Street/Rockefeller Center. He walked to Frompini's shop. It was 10:30 in the morning. He was making great time.

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Wednesday, October 27, 1976, 3:30PM. A Fishing Boat, Jamaica Bay, NY

When Paul Austerlitz awoke, he could hear Vietnamese woman's voices and feel small female hands on his body. They were rubbing some ointment on his sores. A small hand gently held his scrotum and applied a soothing cream.

Paul groaned and sighed into his gag. The surface on which he was lying rocked very gently, as if at sea. There was an ice pack on the swollen lump on his head

A gruff male voice gave some order to the women. The hands stopped tending his wounds. He felt a large knife blade at his temple. Fear gripped him.

The blinding sun burned his eyes as the blindfold was cut from his eyes. The pressure on his wound ceased and some hand put a plastic ice bag on his head wound.

A man gave sharp orders in Vietnamese. A blow up life-vest was put on his torso. Small hands clumsily put boxer style underwear on him. With a quick swipe of a knife the gag was cut and painfully

removed from his face, pulling off much of his three-day growth. The jolt to his head wound caused him to pass out.

When Paul came to, he was floating in the water. It was salty seawater. Squinting in the afternoon sun, he could just make out something that looked like a roller coaster. Could that be the Cyclone at Coney Island? Was this Brooklyn? Why was he hearing Vietnamese? If you're captured give them your name, rank and serial number. What's my name, rank and serial number?

The small waves and the flooding tide pushed Paul to the beach. When he reached the beach, he crawled up out of the water and pulled the life vest over his head. The vest rubbed against the bulging wound on the side of his head. He passed out. Only a lone seagull was a witness on that late October afternoon beach.

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Wednesday, October 27, 1976, 5:30PM. East 125th Street, Manhattan

Thaddeus Loat, a diminutive black man with bad teeth, bad hair, and the foul body odor of the unwashed homeless, pushed a grocery cart with only three wheels down 125th street. He was half singing, half talking to himself, the operatic monodrama of the demented and drunk. His cart held scrap metal and a few pieces of wood.

He would take the metal to the junkyard. The wood he would use to heat up a dented can of soup he had found in the People's Co-Op grocery store dumpster.

Loat, as everyone called him, was usually an amiable, if pathetic, specimen of New York's gritty homeless. He refused social service assistance and preferred to live outside even in the coldest weather. The only nights he spent inside were in holding jails, usually for fighting, public drunkenness, or indecent exposure.

Loat pushed his cart westward toward his tunnel home under the West Side Highway, which he shared with an ever-changing cast of homeless characters. He stopped under the 125th Street New Haven Railroad Train station. He instinctively checked the coin returns of the pay phones for uncollected coins. Looking down on the street, he

saw a check lying against the curb. He reached down and picked it up.

The check was made out to Ben Clarone for 5,000,000. It had a very official look with strange writing. He could read "Five Million Exactly" after the number.

-Jesus, thought Loat, how lucky can I get?

He started doing a little dance-jig around his cart, singing some unintelligible mumble. He had struck gold. Passersby shook their heads and walked a little brisker past him. Loat continued his journey westward contemplating the riches that awaited him. He stopped in Abe's Liquor and Tobacco.

Abe's son, Yair was manning the register.

-So Loat, what brings you here this afternoon?

-Hey, Jew boy, I have money. Look I won five million. He handed the check to Yair.

-Loat, this is not made out to you and it's for Japanese Yen. This check is worthless.

-No, you lie. It's worth five million.

-Yes, five million, but five million yen, not dollars, and it's made out to a Ben Clarone, not you, Loat.

-But it's mine. I found it.

-Hey, Loat, I'll give you a free sample pack of cigarettes, but the check is no good to you, or anyone else, except Ben Clarone.

-You Jew-bastards are always ripping-off us black men.

-Hey, Loat, be nice. I'm willing to help you, but this check is useless to you or me.

Loat turned and mumbling to himself, left the store. When he reached his cart, he realized that he had forgotten his check, which he had given to Yair. Yair was going to be rich and he would continue to be a homeless Black man trading scrap for meager tins of spoiled food.

He felt a furious rage welling up in his body. He took a rusty piece of heavy iron from his cart and went back into the store. A large black woman was buying two quarts of vodka. She was slowly unfolding crumpled singles and Yair was counting them out.

-Mabel, you are drinking too much. I shouldn't sell you this vodka
-Yair, just take the money. I need the vodka. Them devil blues got my soul in a grip.

-Just looking out for you Mabel.

Loat brushed into Mabel's ample bosom as he re-entered the store.

-Get away from me, you stinking bum.

Loat ignored her and headed straight back to the cash register.

-Loat, you forgot your cigarettes, reminded Yair.

Loat walked up to the counter and slashed the iron bar across Yair's head. Yair fell behind the counter. Loat went behind the counter and pummeled Yair senseless with the iron bar.

Loat saw the cash register open and scooped up all the bills. He dropped the tire iron like he had seen Michael Corleone drop the gun in the *Godfather* after Michael had killed Sollozzo and McCluskey. He grabbed a bottle of Seagram's Canadian whisky from the shelves and walked out of the store like Michael Corleone.

When he got to the sidewalk, he took a long slug of the whisky and continued on his journey westward along 125th Street pushing his cart. The five million yen check was soaking up Yair's blood behind the counter of Abe's Liquor and Tobacco.

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Wednesday, October 27, 1976 5:30PM. Manhattan, Midtown North Police Station.

Lieutenant Smith pushed the Incoming Message Button on his answering machine.

-This is Ben Clarone, Detective Smith; I'll be leaving for Philly to play a gig tonight. I will be back tomorrow.

Smith played the message again. It seemed too vague for Ben Clarone.

Clarone had always been expansive in his messages and in person. Where was Ben actually going? That was the question.

LeRoi Burr, aka, Big Stinger, was putting the blame for the murders at Artists Studios squarely on Victor Ruiz. Ruiz was not to

be found. There was an APB with photos of Ruiz given to every beat cop in the New York Metropolitan area. All street eyes had been alerted.

Smith thought Austerlitz was correct. Clarone and his friend Gringovitch were up to something illegal, possibly art fraud. The question was, where was Austerlitz? He was a private investigator, but one with limited experience and unlimited imagination. Smith recalled Mulvihill telling him the same thing. Mulvihill called Austerlitz a Mickey Mouse shamus, a cartoon private investigator: all fiction and no facts.

Smith had the sinking feeling that a big art fraud case was slipping from his grasp.

His phone rang.

-Harold Smith.

-Mulvihill here.

-What's up?

-Lieutenant, we found the five million yen check. Looks like our guy Victor Ruiz helped himself to the cash at Abe's Liquor and Tobacco on East one-two-five. He bludgeoned the clerk with an iron bar. Might have been trying to cash that check.

-Don't let anyone touch anything. I'll be up there as soon as I can get there.

-Yes, sir.

Smith hung up the phone.

-Russo!

-Yes, Lieutenant. I'm right here. You don't have to shout.

-Is there any gas in my car?

-I filled it up just now.

-Come with me, we're going for a ride up to Harlem to see a storied Five Million Yen check. If the man who signed this check knew it would kill five people maybe six, would he have signed?

-I don't know anything about it Lieutenant, replied Russo.

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Wednesday, October 27, 1976, 6PM. Pan Am Worldport, John F. Kennedy Airport.

Ben exited the Brighton Beach livery car at the Pan Am terminal at JFK airport. His contrabass clarinet was on the rear seat. Dan Arris walked up to him with two paintings neatly packaged in cardboard picture boxes.

-Thankfully you were late, Ben. I might have missed you. I was held up getting here. Paul Austerlitz was admitted to Coney Island Hospital this afternoon. Fortunately, he was delirious and could not even identify himself.

-I guess that's a good thing. I hope he's not too badly hurt.

Ben's concern for Austerlitz was well founded. If Austerlitz died, he'd be suspect *numero uno*. Austerlitz had been tailing him and was a snitch for the NYPD and Zoë's divorce lawyer, Arno Agajanian.

-They think he'll be OK in a few days. People who stick their noses in other people's business should be accustomed to taking a punch now and again.

-Let's hope so. My contrabass is on the back seat. Take good care of it. It will be my bread and butter for the next few weeks.

-Don't worry. I won't see you in Paris, but you will be reunited with your instrument. Assuming you have all three pieces of the 100 franc note, Delacroix, Liberté and Les Peuple.

-What if something is compromised? How do I get my contrabass clarinet?

-If there is a problem, tell Miguel Martine, the *patron* at the first "Bouquiniste, the green box, by the Pont Neuf, that you do not have the money for the poster of your concert in 1973. Ask him to hold it for you to claim in a few days when you can deliver the pictures you will be carrying, *if* you haven't been able to make the correct exchanges. He will give you instructions to get your instrument and what to do to buy the poster. Take any pictures you can't deliver back to Nice with you. Someone will contact you about what to do. Under no circumstances are you to hand over any painting to anyone unless they have a piece of the 100 franc note *that fits perfectly*. Got it Ben, *perfectly*.

-OK. Got it. I really will need my contrabass. This better work out.

-You worry too much Ben. Now go catch your flight to Nice. *Bon voyage*, Mr. Adoyan.

End of Book I:

Five Million Yen: New York City

To be continued in Book II:

Five Million Yen: Europe

