

Five Million Yen: Chapter 25

by Daniel Harris

Five Million Yen. Book II: Europe

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Ben Clarone watched Dan Arris get into the Brighton Beach Car Service car and leave the departure zone of the Pan Am Worldport terminal at JFK. Ben's rare all wood contrabass clarinet, which his repairman, Sal Frompini, had spent the last six hours adjusting to Ben's satisfaction was in the car. He stood there with two passports, Benjamin Franklyn Clarone, his real passport; and Benjamin Adoyan, a forged passport that Dan Arris had some former KGB Ruskies make.

Benjamin Adoyan was the family name of the Armenian artist Arshile Gorky. Ben held two paintings in his hand and a backpack on one shoulder. The two paintings were forgeries of Gorky's June 1948 painting *The Unfaithful Wife*. Dan Arris had made the forgeries, and Ben's friend, Anatoly Gringovitch, had over-painted the oil forgeries with gouache creating two original paintings of his own: *The Red* and *The Black* and *The Big Wave*.

Ben's mission was to deliver the paintings to two different addresses in France: Yolande Esquirinchi in Nice and Yousef Al Sidran in Marseilles. As proof of delivery, Ben would receive a portion of a 100 franc note that Dan Arris had cut in thirds using a customized pinking shears so that the cutting of the three parts of the 100 franc note were unique. Ben would then present the now

complete 100 franc note to Miguel Martine, the patron at the first "Bouquiniste" (green box) at the Pont Neuf in Paris. Martine would give him the address where he could retrieve his contrabass clarinet. The three parts of the 100 franc note were *Delacroix*, which Ben had in his wallet; *Liberté* held by Yolande; and the *Le Peuple* held by Al Sidran.

For Ben to get his contrabass clarinet for his concerto gig in Monte Carlo, he had to present Miguel Martine with the three parts of the 100 franc note. The problem was that Ben knew that Yolande had been compromised. His two other partners, Dan Arris and Anatoly Gringovitch, didn't know that. When his flight arrived in Nice, Ben would have to find a solution to the problem of Yolande being compromised. If he showed up in Paris with two parts of the note and one picture, he could still get his contrabass clarinet, but then he didn't know what would happen to him. Should he stop using his Benjamin Adoyan passport and switch to his Ben Clarone passport? A simple delivery job had the potential to become a nightmare.

Repeating the name Benjamin Adoyan over and over in his head, he headed to the ticketing counter at Pan Am. He presented his Benjamin Adoyan passport to the ticket clerk and Adoyan's ticket reservation.

-Mr. Adoyan, can I see your driver's license?

Ben showed the ticket agent Benjamin Adoyan's driver's license.

-Thank you. It is just a formality. You have an open ticket for flight 82 to Nice, France. Do you have a seating preference?

-Aisle.

-The flight is not full. I would suggest a center aisle seat so you can stretch out during the flight and sleep on the unused seats. Do you have checked baggage?

-No, but I have two paintings. I need to have them in the cabin near me.

-Are you an art courier?

-Yes, I am delivering these works to Nice, France.

The ticket agent seemed to type an excessive amount into the computer terminal.

-Sorry, Mr. Adoyan, but I had to enter your address and personal information. It's a required protocol for couriers carrying art to France. Here's your seat. Departure is from gate 27. The flight does not use a skyway, but a shuttle bus out to the airplane. Please be at the gate at least thirty minutes before flight time.

-Thank you, you have been most kind.

That was a close call; he had failed to memorize the address on Adoyan's driver's license. If the ticketing agent had asked, he would have been stumped.

As Ben walked toward the departure gate he realized he was hungry, and he needed a drink. He stopped at a bar and ordered a double scotch and two hot dogs. The scotch tasted watered down and the hot dogs were worse than what one finds on the streets of New York. After surviving a three-month global music tour through twenty-seven countries, bad airport food was not news.

Ben ate the dogs, washing them down with the scotch. He left the restaurant and headed to his gate. When he arrived at gate 27 he surveyed his travel companions. There was a fur-clad, leather-skinned middle-aged woman with two miniature poodles. Two trust fund French teenagers were giggling over an open copy of *Hustler* magazine. There was an assortment of people underdressed for New York in late October, but wearing the colors and clothes of the *Côte d'Azur*.

Unless some tour group showed up, it was a nearly an empty flight. A little later a couple of homosexuals entered the area. One appeared to be French and the other North African. They had sweaters over their shoulders and were wearing thin, tight trousers without underwear that revealed their privates in obvious detail. They conversed in low tones except for an occasional overly loud remark of disbelief.

A bejeweled dowager arrived in a wheel chair. Someone who could have been her daughter was assisting her. The daughter was working hard for her inheritance.

Just before the flight was called, a VIP type in big sunglasses arrived with a couple of young, large breasted blonds and a simpering assistant. He barked orders in Italian to the assistant, who disappeared, not to be seen again.

The ride out to the plane was uneventful. The crew was pleasant but exuded the *laissez faire* attitude of perpetual travelers.

-Mr. Adoyan, can I store this luggage in the first class luggage area?

-Please make sure it is in my sight at all times.

-Oh, I understand. Are you a courier?

-Yes. Please be careful how you treat my charges.

-We understand you are working, so will make sure we watch them at all times.

-Thank you. That is most kind.

Ben knew these bitches wouldn't watch anything. When the flight took off, he would move up near the first class over-sized luggage area. One of the crew looked like a woman with whom he had flown to London a month before the world tour. They had come within a gnat's kneecap of doing her over the stormy Atlantic, but she broke it off to handle a sudden turbulence.

-Now he couldn't remember her name, but if she remembers my real name, Ben Clarone, it could be big trouble, thought Ben..

-Will Mr. Ben Adoyan identify himself so the crew can pass a message to him?

-Jesus H. Christ, thought Ben. Now what?

-He looked at a young tall stewardess with perky breasts and raised his hand.

She came over to his seat.

-Mr. Adoyan, please see the head stewardess in the first class cabin.

Ben unbuckled his seat belt and walked up to first class.

-You were looking for me?

-Your employer, Dan Arris, has upgraded your ticket to first class.

How did she know the name Dan Arris? Is this real, or a ruse so she can be near me?

-Ben. I've been thinking of you for four months. Why didn't you call me?

Ben noticed her nametag: Claudia.

-Well, Claudia I had a three-month global music tour and just arrived home Saturday night. As you can see, I'm off to Nice, actually Monte Carlo. I have a big gig with the Monte Carlo orchestra.

-I gave you my New York telephone number where I'm based.

-My pocket was picked in Lima, and my wallet with all that information was stolen, he lied.

-We'll talk later after food service. I have to prepare for take-off. We have some unfinished business, Ben

-You look terrific Claudia, he lied.

-Ben, you are a hopeless flirt.

Ben looked at her and wondered what was so exciting that he would want to bone her in the tiny bathroom of a commercial jet. He must have been stoned or drunk.

Ben realized he had a problem, his mind started working in double-time. If she remembered his name, it could be a trouble. At least he would soon be out of US air space. The last thing on earth he needed was a stewardess blowing his cover. Using a false passport was a federal and international crime.

On the other hand, she did have great legs. What did Charles Bukowski say, the face goes first, but the legs are forever? Hell, his estranged wife, Zoë Bontemps, had the best legs he had ever seen, or felt around his waist. Those days were over. Zoë and her divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian, were suing him for \$500,000 dollars. A joke. He had maybe ten thousand dollars in musical instruments, a missing check from the tour for five million yen, and a few thousand in dollars and French francs. Zoë had a lead role in *I'd Rather Not* on NBC with a multi-million dollar contract. How backwards could it get? For five years he paid Zoë's bills while she work low pay or no pay actress jobs. She strikes it big and not only wants out of the marriage, but more money than he could gross in five years.

Ben took his backpack out of the overhead bin and headed up to first class. Claudia showed him an aisle seat at the back of the first class cabin, directly in front of where the crew had placed the two paintings. There was an elderly lady, who looked in her eighties in the window seat. Her eyes had a bright clear twinkle and her face had a ruddy complexion of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors in cold climes.

-Excuse me, Mr. Adoyan, would you like a beverage? asked a blond stewardess with a Dutch accent.

-Your best single malt scotch, please.

-Would you like a selection of *hors d'oeuvres*?

-No, just the scotch.

-Ben watched her hips gyrating like a runway model as she walked up the aisle to the galley.

Twenty or so last minute passengers came off the shuttle bus and into the cabin.

-Oh shit, thought Ben, that's Gabriel Benjamin from Park Slope, Brooklyn. The guy he had drinks with at Jack's Park Slope Tavern on Monday evening. Last thing I need is for him to blurt out my real name.

Fortunately, Gabriel, or Gabe, as he preferred, was having trouble with a large pull-along suitcase and passed by Ben without noticing him. Ben would have to resolve this before they arrived in Nice, or there might be issues in the airport.

To hide his face, Ben turned to his neighbor.

-Is this your first trip to Nice?

-Oh, goodness no. My granddaughter lives in Nice.

-I guess you don't have to worry about expensive hotels.

-No, she has a nice flat in *vieux ville*, that's old Nice, if you don't know French.

-Must be nice, Ben punned.

-She is an art acquisition advisor for several museums on the Riviera, she continued, ignoring Ben's cheap pun.

-I don't know much about art, I'm a musician, but I have friends who are painters and sculptors.

The Dutch stewardess put his drink down.

-I'm sorry we don't have any single malt. Is this Whyte & MacKay OK?

-My second choice, Monique, he replied, noticing her nametag.

-I was a little worried. Single malt scotch drinkers can be very particular.

-I'm easy. On second thought, I'll try a few *hors d'oeuvres*, if you don't mind.

-I'll get them right away, Mr. Adoyan

-Thank you. You can call me Ben.

Ben marveled at the motion of her hips as she walked back to the galley. She returned in a minute with half a dozen pastry wrapped shrimp. They were surprisingly good.

-What is happening to me? thought Ben. Two people on this nearly empty flight know me. Claudia knew he was somehow connected to Dan Arris and probably remembered his real last name, if she were as smitten as she claimed. Now Gabe Benjamin shows up who knows my real name and can connect me to Anatoly Gringovitch.

The crew began starting the engines and the cabin crew began their safety drill. Claudia narrated over the public address system alternating between English and French, as Monique pantomimed the actions of attaching the seat belt and putting on the life jacket. Ben noticed that Monique had a nice figure, but her teeth needed work so she kept a tight smile.

The plane began to taxi to the take-off runway. Ben's blood pressure dropped ten points. In a few minutes I'll be free of New York City, thought Ben. He sipped his drink. Monique took the remains of the *hors d'oeuvres*.

-I'll get you more when the captain turns off the seat belt sign. I have to take your drink also.

Ben shot-gunned a shot and a half of the scotch in a gulp.

To be continued.

