

Five Million Yen: Chapter 26

by Daniel Harris

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Ben gagged after shot-gunning the scotch. He hiccupped and it came back up through his nose. He grabbed a napkin and caught most of a shot and a half of Whyte & MacKay as it poured out his nose.

-Probably better it came back up, thought Ben. I need to be on my game. No more drinking.

-You should show more respect for alcohol, young man, said the elderly lady sitting in the window seat next to him.

-Yes, ma'am. You're correct. I probably shouldn't be drinking. I am delivering two paintings for a friend to people in France.

The plane rotated back on its main wheels and slowly lifted off. The pilot was obviously conserving fuel since the engines were not at full power. He used the entire runway.

Ben kept a tight grip on the arms of his seat. He held his breath until the plane was in the air a good two minutes. He had little faith that the pilots could get the plane in the air. Hard to believe he still couldn't relax after the hundreds of take-offs he had survived.

-Who painted the pictures you are delivering? The old lady looked at him with a keen eye. And are you always this nervous on take-off?

-I'm sorry, replied Ben, what were you asking?

-Are you always this nervous on take-offs?

-Always. As a touring musician, I've had many takeoffs and landings, but I still get nervous on take-off.

-That's silly. These big jets are like flying in your living room.

-I guess you are correct, but I'm still nervous during taking-off.

Ben realized that he had no living room. If this was his living room, it had more potential problems than he'd care to have in any living room in his experience.

Ben caught the stewardess Monique's eye.

-Yes, Mr. Adoyan.

-I hate to bother you, but could I have a big glass of seltzer and a cup of coffee? And you can call me Ben, Monique.

-Yes, sir, Monique replied, ignoring his request.

-She seems like a nice young lady, the old lady interjected. I wonder why she chose this profession?

-I guess she likes the excitement of travel, replied Ben. (Or, thought Ben, she prefers zipless fucks, totally impersonal passionate satisfying sex with strangers, made famous in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*.)

Monique placed Ben's seltzer, a cup of ice, and a coffee on the console.

-Do you want cream and sugar?

-No thank you, Monique; I take it *au naturel*, black. Ben was trying to make some impression on her .

-Yes, sir, Monique replied professionally.

-Maybe Claudia, the senior stewardess on the plane, has first dibs on me, thought Ben. Who could decipher the code of the stewardess! Tonight he preferred Monique to Claudia. Monique's hip movement spoke reams about her abilities in the sack.

-Is Adoyan your real name? asked the elderly lady next to him.

-Why, yes, it is. Benjamin Adoyan.

-Do you know that that is the family name of the famous Abstract Expressionist painter Arshile Gorky?

-Actually, I do. I took a few art classes at the Art Institute in Chicago when I was a teenager, and one of my painting instructors mentioned that. (Ben's mind began working double-time again.) It's

actually my mother's maiden name. She never married my father who was killed in World War II. His name was Clarone, Ignacio Gallodoro Clarone. My professional music name is Ben Clarone. I do business as Ben Clarone, but the passport people take my name from my birth certificate.

-Are you the Ben Clarone who plays big clarinets with all kinds of microphones attached to them with foot pedals like guitarists?

-Yes, that fits my description. It's not all I do, but it was my gig for the last three months.

-I think I saw you in Darmstadt in late July. Could that be possible?

-You are right on the money.

-One of my grandsons is studying music composition with Professor Hans Hausenstockmann, the famous Austrian avant-garde composer. Professor Hausenstockmann was teaching at the Darmstadt Hochschule für Musik. I visited my grandson who played trumpet in an ensemble that played a new composition by the Professor. I believe I saw you at a special concert by a Japanese organization that presented new Japanese and American works.

-That's it. I played on two compositions, *Metachanges* and *Songs of Birds Heard & Remembered*. That's not the exact title in Japanese, but that is how it was translated most times.

-Well, Mr. Clarone, that bird song composition was the hit of the concert. I think we were all in tears at the end. You are an amazing virtuoso.

-Well, thank you. You are most kind to say so. The credit goes to the composer Mr. Toganawa. You know I designed special electronics for that composition working with him in New York. We toured in twenty-seven countries and about fifty cities. Keeping the electronics working with all the different electrical systems was a huge chore for me. It was hard enough to keep my technique up for those very difficult compositions under many trying circumstances. The performance in Darmstadt was one of the best of the tour. It made Mr. Toganawa very, very happy because the last time he had a

composition played in Darmstadt, it was a disaster and, as he said, he suffered a great loss of face back in Japan.

-This is a great honor to be sitting next to so accomplished a musician. You seem to get around a lot. Why were you traveling with a Japanese organization?

-Well, it was part of the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial celebrations. The Japanese wanted to have a joint cultural tour and the Bicentennial was a perfect reason to celebrate our two hundredth birthday and 30 years of Japanese-American cooperation since the end of World War II. Now I'm on a different mission.

-You seem like a sought-after musician. Here you are now on the road again, giving Ben a nice grandmotherly smile.

-Well you also, here you are flying with me to Nice, France. I only arrived back in New York City Saturday night and now I'm on my way to Monte Carlo to play a new composition by Hausenstockmann with the Monte Carlo Orchestra.

-That is amazing. No rest for the talented, as they say.

-I thought that was "no rest for the wicked," shot back Ben, not missing a beat.

-You don't seem wicked.

-Don't ask my estranged wife or her lawyer.

-Is your wife also a musician? It can be difficult to have two musicians in one household.

-No, she is the actress Zoë Bontemps. She's currently starring in *I'd Rather Not* on NBC.

-I don't watch much television, but I've seen her name in the tabloids at the super market.

-That's my girl, or should I say, my ex-wife.

-That's so sad. She is quite a beautiful woman. You both are very talented.

-It takes more than beauty to keep a marriage together. Speaking of beautiful women, you must have been a stunner in your salad days, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Cleopatra.

-My name is Ida Oates and I was Miss Idaho in 1922. They called me Idaho Ida. I've had six husbands and have six children, one by

each husband and I have twelve grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. It takes more than talent, beauty and sex to keep a home together. I was a bit wild and a serious gold digger. My mother said to me, "Ida, don't give those looks away for free. And remember, they don't last forever." I mostly followed her advice. My sixth husband headed a big investment bank and left me sitting quite pretty when he died.

-Isn't there a song *Idaho Ida*? Ben said it almost in jest to humor the old broad.

-Yes, there is. You must be the only person beside myself who knows that.

-Lucky guess. I couldn't sing a note of it.

-Well it goes like this, and she began to sing *sotto voce*:

*I'd hoe all Idaho
Looking for Ida Idaho*

And it goes on in that silly vein.

-Nice voice.

-You know, I sang in the Follies in Chicago, she said rummaging in her handbag. Here's a picture of me in my costume, she said, proffering a small, framed sepia photo.

-Wow! You were a serious beauty.

-And, I could sing and dance with the best of 'em.

Claudia was moving down the First Class aisle toward Ben and Ida. She was making small chitchat with each passenger. She seemed to know most of them.

-Well, I see you two are getting along well. My name is Claudia and I am the senior stewardess on this flight. If you need anything, or have any problems or questions that your regular stewardess cannot answer, please see me, or push your call button here next to the overhead light switch.

-I know you, Claudia, said Ida.

-Yes, Ms Oates. Claudia looked at Ben. Ida frequently flies this route on my watch. Except for summer, this is the only direct flight to Nice from New York City.

-She knows my granddaughter quite well, interjected Ida. They go on shopping sprees together.

-Yes, Isabella and I are quite good friends. When she is out-of-town, I stay at her flat in old Nice rather than the rat-hole where Pam Am puts us up.

Ben was happy Claudia did not bring up their previous flight together. He noticed that she had changed, or removed, her make-up. She looked much warmer and inviting than the mask she had on when the plane was boarding. She had also changed to her working flats. Her legs still had that great muscular curvaceous shape of a former dancer.

-We will be serving dinner in about twenty minutes. Would either of you like *hors d'oeuvres* or a beverage?

-No *hors d'oeuvres*, but I will take a champagne, replied Ida.

-And you Mr. Adoyan?

-You can call me Ben. Champagne sounds perfect.

-Protocol dictates we are not to call passengers over twelve years of age by their first name. I'll have Monique bring your drinks.

Salute!

Claudia slipped through the curtain separating first class and economy and continued greeting passengers. Ben was happy she didn't show any familiarity. That might have been tough. This Ida was very sharp and would pick up any hint of intimacy.

Monique brought the champagne and made a show of opening the small split bottles. Champagne in a screw-top bottle was just not the same. But Ben guessed they didn't want champagne corks flying around the cabin. The champagne was ice cold.

-*Salute*, said Ida, offering to clink her glass.

-*Salute!* Ben was trying to catch Monique's hips out of the corner of his eye.

-I see you are a healthy young man, Mr. Clarone. You have an eye for the ladies. I think our stewardess likes teasing you with her hips.

-You've found me out. I confess. Claudia's attractive also. Does this make me a pelagic raptor preying on young females over pelagic seas?

-You do seem predatory, yet respectful...at least so far, replied Ida.

Ida put the photograph of herself as a Follies girl back into her handbag and pulled out a paperback copy of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*.

-Thinking of having a martini? asked Ben.

-No, and don't give away anything if you've read this.

-I won't, but don't put any Ice-Nine on me.

-No, Ice-Nine is in *Cat's Cradle*. You're safe Mr. Adoyan, or Mr. Clarone, whoever you are. By the way, you never told me your friend's name whose pictures you are couriering to Nice.

-An old friend: Anatoly Gringovitch. We go back to junior high school

-You are a friend of Anatoly Gringovitch? My granddaughter in Nice, Isabella Sanitizzare, is a great admirer of Gringovitch's paintings. You have to meet her. She will be thrilled. She has been trying to buy some Gringovitch paintings for a couple of her clients. She is an acquisitions agent for several galleries and museums on the *Côte d'Azur*. Gringovitch is a major rising international star. You could get a commission if you help her procure some of Gringovitch's paintings.

-Well, I'm just a musician friend, though we are very close. I might be able to help you out.

-Would you like to see her picture? asked Ida.

-Of course

Ida dug down in her purse and pulled out her wallet. There was a glassine photo section with pictures of what looked like relatives. She flipped through them until she came to the one she was seeking.

-Here's Isabella last summer at the Beach Bleu in Nice, said Ida, handing the pullout photo section to Ben.

-Youzer, thought Ben, This old lady didn't miss a trick. The granddaughter was a Botticelli beauty. Isabella was sitting on a chaise lounge, topless, wearing a string bikini bottom with oversized sunglasses riding the crest of her abundant Titian red hair. I'm going to be on the *Côte d'Azur* for the next three weeks or more, thought Ben. This is my goal: Make this beauty mine.

-That's a mighty fine looking granddaughter, Ida.

-And she is smart as a whip. Takes after her grandmother, except I have blonde hair and hers is a wondrous red, a perfect Titian red

-I think I could do business with her, if I can get past all her suitors. She must have hundreds.

-*Au contraire*, Mr. Clarone. She's wedded to her career. Most men are afraid of her. She does have a hot temper, just like myself when I was young.

-You'll have to introduce us.

-If you give me back the photo, I'll give you one of her cards. We will be in Nice for a few days and then off skiing. Call her, maybe we can meet for dinner or lunch. We do have tickets to the concerts in Monte Carlo, so for sure we will see you there.

Ida put on her reading glasses and turned to her book. She was out of words, but she had sown the seeds of a plan for her granddaughter to procure some Gringovitch paintings.

Ben could feel heaviness in his stones. This Isabella Sanitizzare was a prize all men would envy. Suddenly Monique and Claudia were just modest eye-candy. Isabella was a serious prize and he had practically been given the key to her boudoir.

Monique came swanning down the aisle handing out menus. Food was not on Ben's mind. The beginning of a plot, probably a double cross of at least Dan Arris, if not his friend Gringovitch, was fomenting in Ben's mind. I hope this Isabella Sanitizzare doesn't

turn out to be a Lady Macbeth in modern dress, or undress depending on my luck.

-Mr. Adoyan would you like more champagne? asked Monique.

-Why, thank you, Monique and please bring one for Ms Oates.

-Thank you, Ben, said Ida from her book.

Monique did her best runway walk up to the galley. Ben couldn't get the picture of Isabella Sanitizzare out of his head. Monique's hair even morphed into Titian red in Ben's mind.

Monique returned and went through the requisite charade of opening the screw-top champagne bottles. Monique's right breast rubbed against Ben's forearm as she reached to give Ida her champagne. Ben could tell she was wearing one of those soft bras. Her breast had a firm heaviness to it. Ida pretended not to notice.

Monique gathered up the empty champagne bottles and used napkins. She leaned down to Ben's ear, her soft hair brushing his face.

-I have a message from Claudia. There is a man, Gabe Benjamin, in economy that would like to speak with you after the meal. See me, and I will take you to his seat.

-That's great, Monique. Remind me after dinner.

-Yes, Ben, I shall.

Ah, thought Ben, he had cracked Monique's company code of formality.

To be continued.

