

Five Million Yen: Chapter 29

by Daniel Harris

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-Ben, you mean you could get whacked for a couple of paintings?

-Well, Gabe, there's more to it than a couple of paintings, but my lips are sealed.

There was a long silence as the two men watched Robert Redford in *Three Days of the Condor*.

Finally Gabe broke the silence:

-Ok, Ben. Gringovitch said I should help you, so this is what we do. We both take a cab to my hotel, the Beau Rivage. You leave the two paintings with me. You go to Yolande's and reconnoiter the situation. You come back to the Beau Rivage and tell me what we need to do. I'm sure Pascal, the Roi de Quoi guy, can come up with a copy of the cut up 100 franc note pretty quickly. If you can't deliver the painting to Yolande, then you will have a counterfeit copy of the 100 franc note Arris cut up. No matter what happens, you should be able to get your axe in Paris and get back to Nice for your gig.

-But what do we do about Claudia? She's Arris's ex-wife, or so she says, and she's supposed to shadow me to Paris.

They both were silent and stared at *Three Days of the Condor*.

-That's a tough one Ben, because we don't know if she is faking an injury, or if she is really hurt and can't walk. I guess we will find out in Nice.

Ben was perplexed. What if Yolande was compromised and he stashed the painting at Gabe's bank in Nice? Yet, he showed up in Paris with a complete 100 franc note cut in three parts? Would Arris or his people know that Yolande was compromised and he was still

in possession of the first painting? When would they know? If they knew before he got to Paris, would he be able to get his contrabass? *He had never missed a gig in his life.* He had no desire to use Arno Donax's contra. Who knew what condition it was in? His reputation was on the line. He had borrowed horns before and had to use all the skills in his repertory to get them to work, and then it was always second-rate. And what if Claudia were faking her injury and followed him out of the airport? Then what? And then there was another problem; Ida and her granddaughter were a friends of Claudia. He needed the perfect judgment and reflexes he had when sight-reading difficult music, but this was *terra incognita*.

-Well, Gabe, the rule is: keep your friends close and your enemies closer. So once I find out about Yolande, I guess I'll have to attach myself to Claudia. I'll tell her I delivered the painting and here's the proof. The problem is getting the time to check out Yolande and for you to give me Roi de Quoi's copy of Arris's cut-up 100 franc note. Of course you will need my part of the note for this Roi de Quoi to customize a pinking shears.

-Ben, if I remember, the night train to Paris from Marseilles doesn't leave until nine thirty at night and arrives in Paris about eight in the morning. We arrive Nice about eleven after we clear customs. The express train to Marseilles takes about two and a half hours , so we will have about four hours to get everything in place for you to get to Marseilles. Assuming no problems, you should make the night train to Paris easily. Either way, you will be traveling with a copy of the cut up 100 franc note, so even if everything goes down the toilet, you can arrive in Paris and retrieve your axe. If you can't deliver the painting in Marseilles, Claudia will be with you to verify that you tried.

-Gabe, this has the potential to just blow up in our faces. I need to think about this alone. I'm going to catch some shut-eye. Tomorrow seems like it could be a Carpathian pig-fuck.

-Carpathian pig-fuck?

-The worst kind.

-Ben, brother, don't worry. I'll be there to help you. I'm good at these things.

-Christ, I hope someone is.

Ben went back to his seat and made-up a funky bed out of the three seats and the three pillows. Sleep did not come easily, but eventually he dozed off.

They turned on the overhead lights when the plane crossed into France at Cognac. The pilot made some predictably stupid remarks about Cognac. Ben went back to sleep. The stewardess awakened him when they were opposite Cannes.

-Mr. Adoyan, you will have to sit up and buckle your seatbelt. We are about to land in Nice.

-OK. *Merci bien.*

Ben sat up and moved to the aisle seat. He buckled his seatbelt. He could make out the coast of the Côte d'Azur through the port side windows. He should have freshened up in the bathroom, but it was too late. On the way out he would freshen up and brush his teeth. Looking out the window he could see it was another perfect Côte d'Azur day, incredible blue skies and not much wind. As painters knew, it was the perfect light to paint in *plein air*.

The pilot made a bumpy landing.

-Jesus, thought Ben, if this is their best landing in perfect conditions, would I trust these clowns in tough conditions?

Nice airport had no jet-ways. A movable staircase was brought to the plane and one deplaned by descending a stairs and walking across the tarmac to the airport terminal entrance. Ben immediately grabbed the two paintings and went to the first class bathroom. He noticed that Claudia and Ida were still seated, though they could have been long gone out the exit door. It was a tight fit with the two paintings in the bathroom, but Ben took care of business and then took a toothbrush from his pack and brushed his teeth.

As he exited the bathroom, two French Pan Am employees were carrying Claudia out of the plane and down the stairs. Ida was following behind.

-I've got your back, said Gabe.

-Jesus, you scared me.

-Easy, this could be an interesting situation, Ben.

-No shit, Gabe. That's Claudia in front of us.

-No problem, she'll go through the crew gate. Be ready with your passport and have the painting export information ready.

Ben had to look at the paintings to find the correct forms in envelopes attached to the paintings. He gathered them and his Adoyan passport so they were ready for passport control and customs. Gabe was dragging his big roll-around luggage right behind Ben.

Ben went into performance mode. He was totally cool. He had years of experience clearing immigration and customs. He followed the up-and-down staircases and winding hallways that immigration people used to watch arriving passengers. This is only a gig, he kept telling himself. Do the job and everything will be OK. He arrived at passport control, totally unruffled.

The French passport control agent could care less. He barely looked at Ben or his passport, but stamped his passport and waved him through. Ben could hear that Gabe was having some issues, but didn't look back at him. Keep moving Ben, he said to himself.

He left passport control and there was a winding pathway that opened onto the arrival area. People were standing holding signs and looking for arriving friends and relatives. Ben saw no familiars. He went down some steps to the baggage claim area and into the line for customs.

A big French customs agent came up to him as he approached the exit.

-Passport.

Ben showed him his Adoyan passport.

-*Parlez françias?*

-*Un peu.*

The man looked at Ben's passport and then at him very closely.

-Are you related to the famous painter Arsheile Gorky? His family name was Adoyan.

-I don't know, it was my mother's name. My father was not married to her. He was killed saving France in 1943. I was born a few months later.

-Very interesting. Why do you have these paintings with you, Mr. Adoyan?

-I'm delivering them to clients in France for my friend, Gringovitch, the artist and painter of these paintings. He has some buyers in France.

-You are a friend of Gringovitch?

-Yes. We were school chums and have been friends since grade school. He trusted me to take them. I am meeting him in a few weeks and having a holiday in Roma.

-I am a big fan of his paintings. Very existential. So you and he go back some time?

-Yes, I went to art school at the Art Institute in Chicago with him, and he was so much better an artist than me or the other students, that I gave up painting and took up jazz.

-Jazz?

-Well, avant-garde music. He's much more successful as an artist than I am in Jazz. I do telemarketing sales now for the Metropolitan Opera. Telemarketing is the second job of most poor musicians.

-Ah, it could be worse.

-Mr. Adoyan, do you have a taxi arranged?

-No, but I have a friend on this flight who has access to a car.

-Well, here is the card of my friend, he is a good driver and he won't rip you off, as they say in America. He will be outside the gates with a sign: Victor Taxi. His name is Victor.

-Well, thank you. May I pass now?

-Welcome to Nice. The agent waved and Ben passed into France.

Ben had to wait about ten minutes for Gabe to clear customs.

-Fucking frogs. They searched my luggage. Took me five minutes to repack everything.

-So now what?

-We take a cab to Beau Rivage.

-The customs guy recommended a guy named Victor. He will be holding a sign Victor Taxi.

-Ben, you jerk, those guys are spies for customs. We'll grab a regular city cab.

Sure enough, there was a short Italian looking guy holding a sign, Victor Taxi.

-Gentlemen, do you need a taxi?

-No, we are waiting for friends, snapped Gabe.

Ben looked down at the pick-up passenger zone. He saw Ida and Claudia, who was in a wheelchair. Ida was standing behind Claudia's wheelchair. They seemed to be waiting for a driver to pick them up.

-Gabe, look, there's Claudia and Ida. Maybe we should try and ride with them. At least we will know where they are.

-Good idea.

Ben and Gabe walked the fifty meters down to Ida and Claudia.

-Claudia, how are you doing?

-Ben, not as well as I would like. Ida's granddaughter, Isabella, is coming to pick us up.

-Will you have room for two of us, my friend from Brooklyn, Gabe Benjamin, and myself?

-It shouldn't be a problem if my granddaughter, Isabella, is alone. She owns a nice Mercedes. Should be room for all of us. Where are you going?

-Hotel Beau Rivage.

-That's in the old city, not far from Isabella's apartment. You know, Matisse lived and painted there near the end of World War I.

-I hope it has been updated since then, interjected Gabe.

-Oh, I think so. I'm Ida Oates. What is your name again?

-Gabe Benjamin. I'm a film guy. I'm scouting locations in Provence for a new film. I'm a friend of Ben's and Anatoly Gringovitch.

-All of Ben's friends seem to be very talented. He must be tired of playing second fiddle to all of you.

-Oh, Ben's no second fiddle. He's being very modest. He's actually one of the best musicians there is.

A black Mercedes pulled up. The driver got out of the car and embraced Ida.

-This must be Isabella thought Ben. She was wearing a short dress with ample cleavage and tasteful heels. She exuded charm and class.

-Ida, it's so good to see you. How was your trip? What's happened to Claudia?

-The plane encountered some clear air turbulence and I fell. I hurt my ankle.

-Oh, we have to take you to a doctor right away.

-I don't think so; my ankle is feeling better already.

Ben smelled a rat. But, he was totally smitten by Isabella. Would he have to travel with Claudia and possibly pork her to get to Isabella? It could be a fun few days. He wished he had those super thin condoms he bought in Japan last week.

Gabe smelled the same rat and thought Ben might get some serious Venus payments out of all this.

-Do you have room for all of our luggage and us? asked Gabe.

-Oh my yes. That's why I pay the big gasoline bills, to ferry people around.

-Are you Isabella? asked Ben.

-Oh, I'm sorry Ben, said Ida, this is my granddaughter Isabella.

-Pleased to meet you.

-And you are?

-Ben. Ben Clarone.

Isabella ignored Ben, turned and opened the trunk of the Mercedes.

-Will you need a wheelchair Claudia? asked Isabella.

-I don't think so.

-Here let me help you get in the car, said Ben. You should probably sit in the front seat. Gabe, Ida and I will sit in the back.

-That sounds good.

Claudia carefully stood up. Ben put his hands around her waist and guided her to the front seat. Claudia fell against him as he was

turning her to sit. Claudia's head rested against Ben's head. Claudia expertly flicked her tongue in Ben's left ear.

-Thank you Ben. I guess I'm not as strong as I think.

-I think we should take her to hospital, said Ida.

-Oh I don't think so. I'll be OK.

-Claudia, I think it is best you get it X-rayed. You don't want a serious problem. If it's just a sprain, they will give you a brace. If it's broken, they will put it in a cast, said Ben. Either way, we will be available to assist you.

-Well, I need to check into my hotel, said Gabe. Why don't you two women take Claudia to the hospital? Ben and I will go to my hotel, the Beau Rivage. If you need our assistance, you can telephone us there, or stop by and pick us up.

-But, I have to be in Paris by Friday to get a flight back to New York, said Claudia.

-Hey, I have to be in Paris on Friday, also. I'm taking the train. Maybe you can travel with me, Claudia. I can help you, even if you are in a wheelchair. Once in Paris we can go our separate ways.

Claudia's eyes brightened.

-Ben, that is so kind of you.

Let's not put the cart before the horse, said Gabe. First take Ben and me to my hotel. You ladies go to the hospital. When we know what Claudia's situation is, we can plan from there.

-Gabe, you sound like a practical man, said Isabella.

Gabe started lifting his heavy suitcase into the trunk.

-Here, let me help you. I don't want any dings in my car.

Isabella took one end of the suitcase and the two of them gently lifted it into the trunk. The effort caused the hem of Isabella's dress to ride up revealing the bottom edge of her panties and her strong muscular legs. Ben didn't miss it.

-Isabella, can these paintings fit on top of the suitcases in the trunk?

Isabella came up on the curb where Ben was standing and measured their size using the reach of her arms.

-It will be close, but I think they should ride in the back seat.
Let's see how they fit there.

Gabe and Ida got in the back seat. Isabella took one of the paintings and slid it in front of Gabe and Ida's knees.

-Looks like one will have to ride in the trunk and the other in the back seat.

Ben gave Isabella the other painting and she carefully laid it on top of the luggage. She gingerly lowered the trunk lid.

-It just fits.

-Mr. Adoyan! Mr. Adoyan!

Ben turned. Monique was calling his name and hurrying toward him with a big limp. There was none of the sexy hip swing in her gait. She held something in her hand.

-Stay there, I'll come to you, Monique, Ben shouted as he jogged over to her.

Monique was dressed in her red Pan Am suit. She looked ready to go back to work.

-What is it, Monique?

-I have two telegrams, one for you and one for Gabe Benjamin, your friend.

-Thank you. I can give Gabe his. Are you actually going to work as a stewardess on the return flight? You can barely walk.

-Of course. I have no choice. There are no substitutes for Claudia or me. I will be OK. It will be tough because there is a big Italian tour group on the return flight, but I'll be in first class.

-We're taking Claudia to a hospital. You should go too. Gabe and I will take a taxi to his hotel.

-No, I have to work. But thank you. You are so sweet.

-I feel badly leaving you here with a bum leg, but what can I do? I would like to know you better.

-Ben, maybe I'll be your date at the concert in three weeks. You will be staying at Villa Arson. I have not forgotten. Give me a kiss.

Ben bent down to give her an air kiss, but Monique turned her head and gave him a kiss full on the mouth. Ben felt her tongue just

tease his lips. He recognized her scent, Chanel 19. It made her alluring and intoxicating. He was glad he had brushed his teeth.

-Be a good boy and make great music. Monique turned and limped back into the terminal. She gave Ben a few steps of her magic hip movement and then disappeared into a crowd of boisterous Krauts.

Ben felt like he had been staring directly into the sun. He was blind. He blinked his eyes and turned to go back to Isabella's Mercedes.

Isabella was talking with the parking cop, who was asking her to move her car. The cop was practically raping her with his eyes.

-I'm coming. I'm coming.

-*Allez, allez!*

Ben stuffed the telegrams in his back pocket and jumped into the car.

-Ooh,la,la. I saw that, said Ida to Ben with a twinkle in her eye.

To be continued.

