

# Five Million Yen: Chapter 30

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Ben felt Ida's elbow in his ribs. Ida leaned into him and put her mouth up to his ear:

-Young man, you will have four assignments during your stay.

Ben shook his head in disbelief: Was this some theatrical soothsayer trick of Ida's?

-Four?

-Trust me. Four scores.

Ben leaned back against the soft leather of the seat. He could see Isabella looking at him in the rearview mirror. Isabella was a smooth driver. One could tell the moment she touched the wheel, she loved her car and she handled it like a pro. The way she merged into the traffic on Promenade Edouard Molnier from the airport ramp and navigated down the Promenade des Anglais ... real skill. She changed lanes fluidly and timed lights perfectly, never more than a feather touch on the brake or accelerator.

-Four women? Who the bejesus was the fourth? Ben's mind was not on his delivery task. A possible fourth assignment? Claudia, Isabella, Monique and ?? Who was the other woman in this Nice quartet? Ben smiled to himself at his bilingual pun on the word nice.

-After these ankle X-Rays, said Claudia to no one in particular, I'm going to need a drink. A serious drink,

-That's if they don't stuff you with painkillers, said Ida.

-Ah, what's the expression? Quaalude days and sleepless nights, interjected Gabe.

-I don't know Quaaludes, but I sure know my scotch, replied Claudia.

-Ah yes, Glenlivet and Glendieth, but the socks stay under the kilt, quipped Ben.

-Jesus, Ben, you are one cheesy cornball sonofabitch, groaned Gabe, stifling a chuckle.

-I hope you are not implying that Claudia doesn't wear smalls, interjected Ida.

-Smalls? asked Claudia.

-Aye, lassie, as in "Mistress Pettywash was the keeper of the Queen's smalls," said Ben in a passably good brogue.

-What do you mean smalls, Ben? asked Claudia.

-She was the keeper of the Queen's lingerie. Only this royal attendant knew the exact state of the Queen's womb, a state secret in those days. The Queen was the property of the nation, including the cycle of her reproductive system.

-Ben, where the hell did you learn that? asked Claudia.

-Long study of the habits of royal women, especially red-haired queens, like E-I.

-You mean Queen Elizabeth the First of England? asked Gabe.

-The very same. Daughter of Henri VIII, a most randy King. Rumor has it; the apple did not fall far from the tree in that department.

-Enough you guys, interjected Isabella. I drive a clean car.

-My apologies, fair Isabella, said Ben. Must be the jet lag talking. I've been traveling for over three months.

Ben could see Isabella in the rear view mirror. Her eyes moved constantly from the road to the mirrors and back to the road. It was a joy to watch her maneuver the big Mercedes.

Isabella turned left off the Promenade des Anglais onto Avenue des Phoncéens, then right on rue Saint-François de Paule. A short block and she arrived at Hotel Beau Rivage.

-Here we are men, announced Isabella.

Ben got out of the car. Ida and Gabe passed the Gringovitch painting to Ben, which had been cramping their knees. Isabella got out and opened the trunk.

-Here's the other picture, Ben. What was your last name, again?  
Asked Isabella.

-Clarone, Ben Clarone.

-I thought it was Adoyan.

-That's a long story, which would take a French lunch to relate, or you can ask your grandmother.

-Who painted these pictures? Asked Isabella.

-They are both by Anatoly Gringovitch. He's a longtime friend of mine. I'm delivering them to clients in France.

-*Anatoly Gringovitch?* You *know* Anatoly Gringovitch?

-Not only do I know him, we grew up together and are close friends.

-Hey, I know Gringovitch, too, interjected Gabe.

-You both know Gringovitch?

-Well, Ben knows him much better than I do, added Gabe, but Anatoly and I are friends living in the same Brooklyn neighborhood.

-I need to talk to you both sometime soon.

-I think Ben is the go-to guy here, I only drink and play cards with Anatoly, or Slava, as his friends call him.

-Isabella's eyes lit up: Ben, you have to tell me where you are staying.

-I'll be at Villa Arson tomorrow night. Today, I have to make a trip to Paris after I deliver one of the paintings here in Nice.

-Who are you delivering it to? Inquired Isabella.

-I'm not at liberty to say. The client and Gringovitch want to keep it confidential. Isabella, what's your interest in Gringovitch?

-The *Centre Nationale d'Art Contemporain* is located at Villa Arson and they are clients of mine. They are looking to add some Gringovitch works to their collection. What are you doing at Villa Arson?

-I am a soloist with the Monte Carlo Orchestra for the next three weeks, so the orchestra is putting me up in one of the artist's ateliers. I need a place to practice away from Monaco.

-You're a musician? What do you play?

-I'm a reed player, but for this gig I'm playing a contrabass clarinet.

-Never heard of one.

-Neither have I, said Gabe, but this guy Ben is the best in the world.

Isabella and Gabe lifted Gabe's big suitcase out of the trunk. Ben copped a visual on her breasts when she bent over to grab the big suitcase. They were prime.

-This suitcase weighs a ton. What do you have in it?

-The usual, plus a case of single malt scotch.

-I guess it's true what they say about film people.

-Hollywood doesn't only run on money, Isabella. A kilo of cocaine might be more typical, but harder to get through customs.

-Really? Said Isabella ironically closing the trunk.

-Do you need help checking in? asked Isabella. I speak perfect French.

-No, Ben and I will muddle through. We're both old road warriors. Thanks for the lift, and good luck with Claudia's ankle. Call me if you need some help. I've earned a big rep as a guy who can fix, find or procure anything, anywhere, anytime.

-I'll remember that. *Bonne journée*. (Have a good day)

- *Bonne journée*!

Ben and Gabe watched Isabella get in the car. She effortlessly pulled around some parked cars and expertly negotiated the narrow cobbled street in the big Mercedes at high speed.

-My kind of bitch, marveled Gabe.

-Tell me about it, Gabe. She puts out so much heat; I could feel it in the back seat. I'd love to jump her bones.

-You're not the only one, Ben.

-Yeah, but redheads can be difficult. Ida says, she's a terror with men. Only thinks about her career. Uses men like hand towels.

-Well, Ben, she sure acted like she knew how to twist a man around her finger. You should have seen her with that cop at the airport.

-Gabe, she can twist me up all she wants and smoke me like a joint.

-Ben, in Brooklyn they say, do me like a cheesecake.

-I don't know from cheesecake, but I know what I like to eat.

Gabe rolled his eyes.

-Grab your stuff, Ben Two-Name. Let's get movin'.

Gabe checked into the hotel while Ben looked over a kiosk with flyers for all the local attractions. He found a map of downtown Nice. It looked like Avenue Clemenceau was about six or eight blocks away. The elevator could barely hold one person. Gabe went up with his suitcase and sent the elevator back down to Ben. Ben couldn't quite close the door of the elevator with the two pictures and his backpack.

-*Pardon, où se trouve l'escalier?* (Where is the staircase?), Ben inquired of the reception clerk.

-*Monsieur, à votre droite, allez tout droit et à gauche* (To your right, go straight, it's on your left).

-*Merci, bien.* (Thank you very much.)

Ben tried to remember which floor Gabe's room was on. It was the third floor, but the ground floor was not the first floor. Ben schlepped up four flights. Fortunately, Gabe kept the door open. It was room 37.

-What time is it, Gabe?

-Almost noon. You better get moving. Do you know where to go?

-No problem. I scored a *plan de ville* from a kiosk in the lobby. It's about six blocks. I should be back in half an hour. Wait for me.

-Don't worry. I'm taking a shower and pouring a few fingers of this scotch. There'll be a shower and some scotch for you when you get back. Meanwhile I'll call the Roi de Quoi and my bank.

Ben checked his wallet for francs and his jacket pockets for passports. He put his airline ticket in his backpack with the Ben Clarone passport. It was much warmer in Nice than New York, but Ben decided to stay with his hip New York distressed leather jacket.

-OK Gabe, if I'm not back in forty-five minutes send out an APB.

-Ben, take this card, it has the hotel telephone number. Buy a *Télécarte* at a *tobac*. Remember, I'm in room thirty-seven.

-Got it.

Ben closed the door and headed down the hall to the elevator. He pushed the call button and waited. It was one of those French elevators where you worked the doors yourself. He entered and pushed RC, *rez de chaussée*, the ground floor.

Ben exited Hotel Beau Rivage and took a moment to orient himself. He remembered there was a main artery bounding an open plaza. According to the map he should cross the plaza and find himself on Avenue Jean Medecin. Crossing the two big boulevards was a typical European pedestrian nightmare. Ben noticed that workers were setting up for the big Halloween festivities in the plaza. Near the corner of rue Masséna there was a *tobac*. He went in and bought a copy of *Libération* and a one-hundred-unit *Télécarte*.

The sidewalks were full of people. Traffic on Jean Medecin was bumper-to-bumper and the air was heavy with exhaust fumes.

-This toxic air quality really blows the image of Nice as a healthy resort city, thought Ben. He was happy not to be carrying anything. He tried to remember the last time he walked some place without carrying a backpack or musical instrument. Ben crossed Boulevard Victor Hugo. It should only be a couple more blocks.

At the corner of Jean Medecin and Georges Clemenceau, there was a huge café, the Grand Café de Lyon. I could use a coffee, thought Ben, but first I have to check out Yolande's restaurant. Ben turned left on Clemenceau and walked two storefronts down the street and then he saw what "compromised" meant. The restaurant was destroyed by an explosion and fire. There was police tape in front of the façade.

Ben walked back to the corner and took an outside table at the Grand Café de Lyon. He ordered a *pastis*.

-*Glace?* (Ice?)

-*Oui*.

The waiter turned to leave.

-*Garçon, peut-être quelques cacahuètes et olives.* (Waiter, perhaps some peanuts and olives)

-*Bien sur* (of course)

Ben remembered the telegrams in his back pocket. He took them out and opened the one addressed to him.

SENDER A GRINGOVITCH MAIN NEW YORK NY

RECIPIENT BEN ADOYAN PANAM FL 82 OPS AIRPORT NICE  
FRANCE

BEN STOP I GAVE YOU THE WRONG PAINTING TO GIVE  
YOLANDE. STOP

GIVE PAINTING TO GABE. STOP WILL MEET YOU NICE THREE  
WEEKS STOP AG

The waiter brought the *pastis* with a small carafe of water. The *pastis* was turning milky white from the two small ice cubes in the glass. The waiter set down a small saucer with some peanuts and some Niçoise olives. It looked like someone had counted out exactly six olives and a dozen peanuts.

The waiter put down a saucer with the check. Ben motioned him to stop. Ben opened his wallet and gave the waiter a 100-franc note. The waiter returned nine ten-franc coins and tore the check half way through to indicate paid.

-*Des monie pour cette pièce de dix francs?* (Change for 10 francs)

The waiter took one of the ten-franc coins and replaced it with small change.

Ben put a franc tip on the saucer.

-*Merçi, monsieur.* You should practice your French. You speak it like a French-Canadian, the waiter said in English.

-*D'accord.*

The waiter gave Ben a smile and turned to another customer.

Ben carefully poured the water into the *pastis* glass as if he were doing a science experiment. At the first sip, Ben knew he was in France. The African peanuts were stale, but the olives were perfect.

Ben looked at the headlines in *Libération*. On one of the interior pages was a photo of Yolande's restaurant with what looked like Yolande being consoled by a policewoman. The headline: ***Affaire de Corse: Quand cela finira?*** (The Corsican Affair: When will it end?)

Ben put the paper down. Two bad developments: He had the wrong painting and Yolande's restaurant had been bombed. He was ready to stash the paintings in Gabe's bank, get the counterfeit cut-up 100 franc note from Roi de Quoi, and get to Paris as soon as possible so he could be ready for any more screw-ups that came his way. He had to get his contrabass. That was now Job One. Screw the paintings. Since when were bombers involved in an art deal? Bombers were not on Ben's list of potential business associates.

Ben savored the last olive and put the pit at the end of the row of pits on the saucer. He had eaten only one of the peanuts. He poured the last of the water into the remnants of his *pastis* and let it drain into his mouth.

When he stood up, he could feel the effects of the *pastis*; the sun seemed overly bright and he was a little dizzy. He made his way through the tables to the sidewalk and decided to take another look at Yolande's restaurant.

-Shades. I need sunglasses. I forgot how bright the sun is here.

The Grand Café de Lyon was big and extended a long way down Clemenceau. There was a taxi stand. At the end of the taxi queue, Ben saw Victor Taxi, the car belonging to Victor, the man the customs agent at the airport had recommended and Gabe fingered as a spy. Victor was not in his taxi, nor did Ben see him on the street.

-I wonder if Victor is a government agent tailing me? Ben murmured to himself.

When Ben got opposite Yolande's he walked up to the police tape. It sure looked like a bombed restaurant. What a wreck. The security gate on the left side of the front door was mostly intact. Ben noticed



an envelope stuck in the gate. It looked like a U.S. sized envelope. He looked around. No one was watching. He snatched the envelope, saw U.S. postage and stuffed it in his leather jacket.

Ben continued up Clemenceau to rue Paganini, where he turned right. When he arrived at Avenue Thiers, he saw Gare de Nice off to the left. He entered the train station and went to the ticket counter.

He bought a ticket for Marseilles and another for Marseilles-Paris on *Le Train Bleu*. He saw a phone *cabine* and called the Hotel Beau Rivage.

-*Donnez-moi chambre trent-sept, s'il vous plait.* (Give me room 37, please)

Ben could hear the phone ringing.

-*C'est Gabe Benjamin.*

-Gabe, it's me, Ben. I've got some crazy news. I'm at the train station and am headed back to Beau Rivage. We are going to need that *Roi* guy.

-Well, hustle back here. Time is short.

-I'm on my way.

Ben hung up. He could feel the filched envelope in his jacket. There was no name on the return address, only a Brooklyn post office box number. He opened it up. There was the *Liberté* portion of the 100-franc note. He put the *Liberté* section of the cut-up note in his wallet with his third of the note and tore up the envelope. He put some of the envelope in a trash receptacle in the station and the rest in another trash can on Avenue Medecin.

-Finally some luck, Ben said to himself. Now I need to buy some sunglasses and some condoms. What did the French call them ... *préservatifs*?

Yeah, I need to preserve my reputation. My life needs a *préservatif*. Irony engulfed him like a coat of medieval chainmail. What was the other French word for condom, *capote*: a protective cap. Would a *capote* protect him from bombers? He liked thinking he held a hand with four queens. Damn the bombers, headlong into the fray.

To be continued.

