

Five Million Yen: Chapter 31

by Daniel Harris

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The Bronx, New York, 5:30 AM, Thursday, October 28, 1976

Lt. Harold Smith had a huge chemotherapy headache. His skin felt like the dried fish skin his oboe-playing daughter used making her reeds.

-Jesus, who would be calling me at 5:30 A.M?

He picked up the phone next to the bed. His now-awake wife gave him a stare of total incredulity.

-Smith here.

-Lieutenant, this is Inspector Paumé at INTERPOL in Paris.

-Do I know you?

-I was your partner on the Albrecht Altdorfer case a few years ago. I'm calling from Paris.

-Ah, yes, Inspector Paumé. I remember, excuse me; it's 5:30 in the morning in New York.

-No problem Lieutenant; I just thought you would like to know that your guy, Ben Clarone, arrived in Nice, France airport this morning at 1030 local with two paintings. An art dealer, Isabella Sanitizzare, picked him up at Nice airport. He had two paintings with him and no musical instruments. Very strange for a well-known international musician having no musical instrument with him, especially since he is advertised as a soloist with the Monte Carlo Orchestra in three weeks. Furthermore, he received a telegram from Anatoly Gringovitch, as did his sidekick, Gabriel Benjamin. A Dutch stewardess, Monique Speeltje, who was on duty during his Pan Am

flight to Nice, delivered the telegram to him. She met him just outside the airport, as he was about to leave with Isabella Sanitizzare. There was some intimate contact between Clarone and Speeltje.

-Knowing Clarone's life in the last few months, I would say he is deserving of a little affection.

-Well, Lieutenant, our man Victor followed him to Hotel Beau Rivage and then to Yolande's restaurant in Nice. Yolande's restaurant had been bombed two days earlier by some faction of Corsican Anti-Separatists. Yolande Esquirinchi's husband, Adriano, is serving prison time for arms smuggling and possession of bomb-making materials. He was a leader of the Corsican Separatist movement in Nice. Since Clarone did not have the paintings with him, we assume he stashed the paintings with his traveling companion, Gabriel Benjamin, a film producer and neighbor of Anatoly Gringovitch.

-So far, I don't see a problem. If Clarone was carrying Gringovitch paintings, and we know he is a boyhood friend of Gringovitch's, what's the problem?

-Well, a young woman, Celine Crisse, was arrested in Paris for trying to fence a stolen *Guarneri del Gesu* violin. She claims she paid Gringovitch five years rent for an apartment, owned by Gringovitch, at 185 rue Charenton in Paris with a stolen Arshile Gorky painting. The painting is from 1948, right before Gorky kicked the champagne crate over and hung himself in his backyard tool shed. Its title is *The Unfaithful Wife*. How it ended up in Celine Crisse's hands is unknown. But she claims she gave it to Gringovitch in lieu of rent money.

-I'll have to think about this, Inspector Paumé.

-What do you Americans say, here is ze kicker? Ben Clarone entered France under the name Benjamin Adoyan using a valid passport. Adoyan is Gorky's family name. Gorky was a professional name Arshile Gorky adopted with a far-fetched story of his supposed family relationship to the Russian writer, Maxim Gorky.

-Now, *that* is interesting, Inspector.

-There's more Lieutenant. Zoë Bontemps, Clarone's estranged wife, has hired Arno Aghajanian, the Hollywood celebrity divorce lawyer, as her attorney.

-Yes, I am aware of that.

-Aghajanian is a well know benefactor of the Armenian cause in Turkey. There are rumors that Aghajanian has contacted some people of questionable ethics to procure the Gorky painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*. It would make a nice trophy for a divorce attorney. We assume the painting is, or was, in Gringovitch's hands and may be one of the paintings Clarone has taken to France.

-Do you know any of the people of questionable ethics? inquired Smith.

-You may remember the name Dan Arris, forger *extraordinaire*.

-A genius, but a ruthless operator.

-He just passed through customs at Charles De Gaulle an hour ago. Arrived on an Air France flight from Montreal. Arris was carrying a very large case.

-Your people have been busy.

-We'd like to confiscate the two paintings Clarone, aka Adoyan, took to Nice. What do you think?

-My first impression is to shadow Gabriel Benjamin. Find out what he does with those paintings. You might end up with more than bait in your trap if you wait to see what develops. As long as we know where the paintings are, we have the honey for the bears.

-I'm not sure my people will like that.

-Try it. There's no hurry. If the buyer is in LA, we will watch him. When he leaves for your side of the pond, we'll let you know. As far as Clarone is concerned, he's a brilliant musician, but an ingénue when it comes to the sophisticated high stakes bait-and-switch art game.

-You are implying Clarone's an innocent courier being used by Arris and his people?

-Something like that. He's a serious musician. My guess is that Arris is holding his instruments until he makes good on the delivery. We researched Clarone thoroughly for a recent case. He's pretty

straight. As the musicians say of a totally reliable and brilliant player, he's never missed a downbeat in his life. Has a weakness for beautiful women, but not enough to mess up his professionalism.

Paumé made some *sotto voce* remarks about musicians.

-Keep a loose tail on Clarone and a sharp eye on the paintings, advised Smith.

-Ah, you're always the clever one, Smith. I'm sorry to wake you, but you are the best art fraud man we know.

-Thanks. I will have to get on this ASAP. I have some personal business to attend to, but I should be in my office later this afternoon your time. Telex me all the details and your contact information.

-Good luck my friend, there is a rumor that you are quite ill.

-I wouldn't believe everything you hear, Inspector.

-I will keep you informed of any new developments, Lieutenant.

-Thank you, Inspector.

- Goodbye and good luck, Lieutenant.

Lt. Smith put down the receiver and looked at his long-suffering wife.

-That was detective Paumé from INTERPOL in Paris, he told her. A new art fraud case involving an Arshile Gorky painting.

-Do they know you are suffering from melanoma?

-I don't tell them. It's pretty obvious when they see me.

-I die a little death every time I see you. How you suffer!

-Thank you, my dearest. You are a true and loyal companion. If I don't keep doing my job though, you would have no respect for me at my funeral.

-Don't talk of funerals.

-When I go, I go, but I want my family and peers to be proud.

-Harold, you know your family loves you. Pride is not required, we will remember you always as the good man you are.

The phone rang again. The lieutenant stopped caressing his wife's hand and answered.

-Smith here.

-Smith, this is Austerlitz.

-Austerlitz, where have you been?

-Under the weather, but I'm back on duty. I am headed to the burned-out house across the street from Gringovitch. I will report all activities. I think there is some fraud going on. A few days ago I saw some paintings in Ginrgovitch's studio that were in gouache or gouache-like paint. He never works in gouache, only oils. Something fishy is going on. I will watch his home for activity.

-You told me that already. Let me know what new things you discover.

-I'm your point man Lieutenant.

-Thank you, Austerlitz. Don't do anything foolish.

Smith hung up.

-One crazy dude, but perhaps he's onto something.

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Hotel Beau Rivage, Nice, France 11:30AM, Thursday October 28, 1976

Gabe Benjamin hung up the phone after speaking with Ben. He grabbed his address book. Looked up a number and called.

-*Allo?*

-*Allo.* I need to speak to Pascal Leroi. It is urgent.

-He is at the Opera.

-Please give me a telephone number where I can speak with him.

Gabe dialed the number and got the main switchboard at the Nice Opera.

-I need to speak with Pascal Leroi. It is urgent.

-One moment.

Gabe paced around the small room with the headset in his right hand up to his ear. He held rest of the phone in his left hand as he paced.

-This is Pascal.

-Gabe Benjamin here.

-Ah, Gabe, *mon ami*, you didn't tell me you were coming to France. Where are you?

-Hotel Beau Rivage. I didn't know I was going to France until last night. Listen, I need two favors and this is *entre-nous*. How soon can you meet me at the stage door of the Opera?

-As soon as you can get here.

-Five minutes.

-OK.

Gabe hung up. He put on some chinos and a polo shirt and headed down the stairs. The opera was three short blocks. Pascal was waiting.

-Gabe what's the hurry?

-I need a big favor, actually two. The first is you must store two paintings for me and get them out of my hotel Beau Rivage without anyone noticing. The other I will explain in an hour or less. But first we have to get those paintings in safe hands. There is nothing illegal, but someone has been following me. They are up to no good. Can you get them out of Hotel Beau Rivage and someplace safe? I will store them in my bank tomorrow.

-Gabe, I am not the *Roi de Quoi* and you're not Gabe Benjamin if we couldn't pull off a simple slight of hand. Come with me.

They walked over to a small van.

-Giuseppe, can I borrow your truck? I need to get some packages.

-The keys are in it. Just don't put it some place I will get a parking ticket.

Pascal and Gabe got in the truck. Pascal backed it up and went the wrong way down a street and parked by a side door of the Beau Rivage.

They went in the front door of the hotel.

-May I help you? Asked the clerk.

-I'm Gabe Benjamin in room 37. I have a few packages in my room. This man, gesturing to Pascal, is here to collect them. His truck is parked in the rear of the hotel. Is there a door he can use?

-Why of course.

The clerk walked them down a hallway and showed them a rear door, which opened on to a side street. The truck was ten feet from the door.

-I'll be right back, said Gabe. You two watch the truck. We don't need a parking ticket.

-Absolutely, but hurry. The police are vigilant in this quarter, replied the clerk.

Gabe took the stairs and entered his room. He grabbed the two paintings and ran back down the stairs. As he went past the desk, he rang the bell. Gabe could see Pascal talking with the clerk. When the clerk heard the bell, he turned and walked back toward the front desk. Gabe ducked into a side alcove and waited until the clerk passed and entered the back hallway to the open door.

-Quick, get these in the truck, Gabe ordered. Call me in half an hour. It will be lunchtime. You know the French don't do anything during lunch.

-That includes the opera, Pascal reminded Gabe.

-I'm in room 37.

-Got it. These items are safe with me. I'll put them in my storage locker at the opera for now.

-Cover them so they aren't conspicuous.

-You worry too much, Gabe. I'll call you in half an hour.

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Nice, France, Avenue Jean Medecin, Noon, Thursday October 28, 1976

Ben saw a pharmacy on Avenue Jean Medecin. He entered and asked for preservatifs. The young woman behind the counter asked how many. Ben thought four times four was sixteen.

-Give me twenty-four Kimono preservatifs.

-We only have packs of three.

-Give me eight three-packs.

-These are expensive. Have you used them before? They can be difficult to use.

-Do I look like I need a lesson?

-Please, Monsieur, I was only trying to be helpful.

-Accept my apologies, mademoiselle

-They are two francs fifty each. That will be sixty francs.

Ben gave her six ten-franc coins.

-Merci, monsieur. Good luck, enjoy your purchase, said the clerk with a wry smirk on her face.

-Merci, Mademoiselle, Au revoir.

Ben put the package in an inside pocket of his leather jacket and left the store. Maybe I should have asked her for a personal lesson, chuckled Ben to himself. She was cute and very French. Who knows? Luck is when preparation meets opportunity. There was a missed opportunity.

A few storefronts down the street he saw an optometrist's shop with sunglasses displayed in the window.

-My eyes are very sensitive to sunlight. Do you have some very dark sunglasses? Inquired Ben of the clerk who looked like a dormouse. He had big eyes, a bushy beard and a round face.

-Yes, we have several styles. This is a pair that is favored by jazz musicians and celebrities.

Ben put them on. They were the darkest shades he'd ever worn.

-I'll take them monsieur, he said appraising himself in a mirror.

-I must warn you that when you take them off in bright light, you could hurt your eyes.

-How much?

-120 francs.

Ben paid the clerk.

He left the shop wearing the sunglasses. It was like walking at night but it was high noon.

-Perfect, thought Ben.

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Hospital Saint-Roch, Nice, France, Noon, Thursday, October 28, 1976

Claudia came out of the emergency treatment rooms and entered the waiting room in the hospital. She had one crutch and her right ankle was heavily taped. Ida and Isabella stood up and went to her.

-What's the verdict? asked Isabella.

-Severe sprain. Ice, elevation and rest are the treatments, But, I need a drink, now!.

-My apartment has ice, elevation and places to rest. I might mention that it has a wide selection of libations and food. I even have an unopened fifty-year-old bottle of Scotch.

-Now, that's something this girl would like to taste. Let's get moving!.

The three women left the hospital with Claudia and Ida lagging behind as Claudia tried to master walking with the crutch.

-Why don't you two wait here, and I'll get the car, said Isabella.

-Don't take too long, I'm not good leaning on this crutch.

-I'll be back presto.

Ida noticed a bus stop bench half a block away.

-Why don't we sit on that bench, Claudia? Isabella could be a while with all the one-way streets and midday traffic.

-Good idea. I didn't expect my ankle to hurt so much after they bandaged it.

The two women walked slowly to the bench with Ida holding Claudia's free arm.

-How am I going to get to Paris by Saturday? I can't go by train.

-Can't you fly? Don't they give stewardesses special fares?

-Yes, and no. I'll have to make some phone calls. I might be able to catch a courtesy flight.

-Do you have anyone to meet you in Paris?

-Well, Ida, I'm meeting someone, but they will not come to the airport. I will take a taxi.

-Do you mind my asking who you will be meeting?

-Not at all. It's my ex-husband and we are meeting at the Ritz. A big client is entertaining him. He wanted me to experience the Ritz at least once in my life. We won't be doing any dancing with his big bandage on my ankle. There will be no bedroom sport, either. We've done the post-divorce sex thing, and it wasn't good.

-Well, Claudia, that's generally been my experience, too. You either feel like your committing incest, or you're a spoil of war.

-You are so right, Ida.

-Here comes Isabella, said Ida as she stood up and waved.

Isabella saw her and pulled up to the bus stop. Isabella got out of the car. She and Ida helped Claudia into the back seat. Claudia sat sideways with her bad leg resting on the rear seat. Isabella and Ida sat in front.

-Food and scotch, announced Isabella as she pulled the big Mercedes around a parked truck and onto a side street.

-I prefer bubbly, said Ida, easier on my system.

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Hotel Beau Rivage, Nice, France 12:30PM, Thursday October 28, 1976

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Ben knocked on room 37 of the Hotel Beau Rivage. Gabe came to the door and opened it a crack.

-Oh, it's you Ben. Why didn't you say your name?

-I'm traveling incognito.

-You think those shades make you incognito? You look like Ben Clarone, jazz musician.

-You know how to hurt a guy.

-Ben, forget that, I had to take some serious evasive action. When you left I checked you out on the street and Victor Taxi was following you.

-Damn! I knew it. Victor Taxi was parked almost in front of Yolande's Restaurant.

-Not good.

-So what the hell did you do?

-Hey, easy Ben. I called my good friend Roi de Quoi who is the *mise en scene* for *Tosca* at the Nice Opera. We snuck the two paintings out of this hotel. They are in his locker at the opera. Tomorrow I will put them in my bank.

-So how am I supposed to deliver the painting in Marseille later today?

-Ben, we have you covered.

The phone rang. Gabe answered it.

-OK, the shell restaurant on Place Garibaldi. Café de Turin. Yes, I know it well.

Gabe covered the mouthpiece of the handset, Ben, do you like oysters?

-Are you kidding? I love them, but my balls are ready to explode from too much sperm. I hope I don't embarrass us.

-Ben says, his balls need a recharging, said Gabe into the phone.

Ben could hear laughter on the line.

-OK. We will meet you in fifteen minutes.

-Ben, take your pack. We may be tight on time for you to catch the four o'clock train to Marseille. We will have lunch and then *Roi de Quoi* will make a copy of your cut-up 100 franc note.

-I didn't tell you. I have the *Liberté* portion of the note. The mailman left Arris's letter stuck in the metal shutter of the restaurant. I filched it.

-What was wrong with Yolande's restaurant?

-It was bombed. Here look at this article in *Libération*.

Ben showed Gabe the photo.

-Man, you got yourself mixed up with some mean-ass dudes, Ben.

-Let's just hope they don't kill the messenger.

-We have to boogie to meet Le Roi.

The two men left the room and hustled over to Avenue Jean Juarès, turned right and walked to Place Garibaldi. When they passed the intersection of rue Pairoliere, Gabe pointed out a small restaurant with a sidewalk window.

-Ben that's the second best *socca* restaurant in Nice.

The best *socca* restaurant in France and the world is *Chez Pipo* near the port.

-What is *socca*?

-It's like a crepe but twice the size of an American pizza. The dough is made from garbanzo bean flour, olive oil, salt and sometimes rosemary. The tradition here is to put a lot of black pepper on it. Better than any pizza and great with beer. When you get back to Nice, you've got to try it. I'll put it on my list of foods for

you to try. If we didn't have to meet *Le Roi*, I'd stop and buy a platter. They scrape it off the pan with a putty knife. Great stuff.

-You're making me hungry, Gabe.

-Plenty of shellfish at Café de Turin where we're meeting Le Roi.

At Place Garibaldi, Ben saw the statue of the Italian Liberator. They followed the street around towards rue Cassini. There was Café de Turin. A smallish elf-like man was sitting at a table for four. He stood up and waved to Gabe.

-Gabe! How do you say in American, "Hey Man, great to see you?"

- "Hey man, great to see you," laughed Gabe, imitating Pascal's French accent. It was an old routine for them.

-*Touché*, mon ami.

-Pascal, this is my great friend Ben Clarone.

- Pleased to meet you, Ben. Your name is on posters all over the Côte d'Azur.

-Thank you and it's a pleasure to finally meet the legendary *Roi de Quoi*. Did you say posters of me?

-*Oui*, you. They are all over, Ben. Every kiosk.

-My estranged wife, Zoë Bontemps is all over New York on posters ... every train, bus, subway station, even on Times Square. She is the star of a big television series, *I'd Rather Not*. Too bad we weren't this famous when we were married.

-You're better off, offered Gabe.

-Sit down. Let's eat and then we can talk. The blue Belon oysters are very good this year.

-Pascal, we'll let you order, but I'll pay.

The garçon arrived to take the order.

-Bring two dozen blue Belons and a bottle of *Moscato Giallo* well chilled, ordered Pascal.

-*Ben sûr, monsieur*. A good choice.

The waiter left and the three men settled in, sizing each other up.

-So, Pascal, we need your services. First we need to keep the two paintings out of the hands of the police and other interested parties. I intend to deposit them in my safe deposit area at Credit Suisse tomorrow morning. I have a large secure cage for expensive movie props.

-What makes you think the police won't get an order for them, or look for them in your hotel room? asked Pascal.

-Good question, replied Gabe.

-Why doesn't Pascal make up some dummy boxes for you to stash in your hotel room Gabe? inquired Ben. Then, if the cops raid your hotel room, they take the boxes and bingo! No paintings.

-Hey, this innocent musician is getting clever. Are you sure you aren't a mafioso. You sure look like one in those shades, said Gabe.

-Well, that woman over there with the flashy necklace and the big jugs can't tell I'm giving her the ray, offered Ben.

-I think she knows, said Pascal, she's squirming in her chair.

The waiter brought the oysters and the chilled wine, which he put in a champagne ice bucket.

-Blue oysters. I've never had them before. And they have a pretty green edge to them, observed Ben.

-How in hell's name can you tell what color the oysters are in those silly glasses? asked Gabe.

Hey, man, I'm Ben Clarone. I don't miss anything. I've made all my money being totally accurate.

-Maybe in the musical world, Ben, but we all know you as a total bumbling fuck-up, chided Gabe.

-Gabe, you are speaking too fast for me, complained Pascal.

The three men stopped talking and got down to serious eating.

-Wow, these are amazing, exclaimed Ben. So many tastes: sweet, briny, tart, and tangy. Love it.

-Pascal, this is a real treat, said Gabe.

-You know, they are trying to raise these oysters in America. But I don't know if they will have the same taste. The water and the sea

bottom is not the same. Also, the French have many secret procedures to enhance the taste of the oyster before it goes to market, said Pascal.

The men finished the oysters.

-A plate with every kind of shellfish for the table? asked Pascal.

-I'm for another two dozen oysters, said Ben.

-You Americans. Garçon, another two-dozen oysters and another bottle of *Moscato Giallo*.

The waiter served the remaining wine and turned the bottle over in the ice bucket.

-Pascal, here's the tricky deal. Ben has a 100 franc note that one of his confederates has cut in three parts with a customized pinking shears.

-Pinking shears?

-Those scissors with the triangle cut.

-Ah, *ciseaux à cranter*. They are used by cloth cutters.

-Exactly, said Ben. Dan Arris wants proof that Ben delivered the paintings. He mailed the two other parts to two people in France. He is supposed to deliver the paintings and get a part of the 100 franc note as proof of delivery. It's not clear they got the parts of the bill. But Ben needs a complete bill to get his instrument to play the gig with the Monte Carlo Orchestra. As a fail-safe, we need a three-part 100 franc note that matches what he should receive as a receipt.

Ben pulled out his wallet and gave Pascal the two pieces of the 100 franc note. Pascal scrutinized the two pieces. He pulled a magnifying glass from his pocket and studied them carefully.

-The scissors have been modified with a file. There are two right triangles as opposed to all isosceles triangles. I also see a small tear caused by a burr on one of the modified teeth on both pieces.

-Can you duplicate that cut using another 100 franc note to make the missing third piece?

-I can do it in my shop in twenty minutes. I will use a sharp knife since I have the two pieces as a template for the two sides. Fortunately, the serial number of the note is not present in the missing part.

-I will need it when I leave for Marseille at four this afternoon.
Can you have it for me?

-We will go to my shop after lunch. I'll make the missing portion of the bill. Then I'll fabricate some picture boxes to leave in Gabe's hotel room for any snoopers.

-Pascal, you and I will talk about payment later.

-Gabe, we are old comrades-in-arms, I'm sure you will take good care of me. But, we're neglecting the oysters. Eat my friends. *Bon appétit.*

To be continued.

