

Five Million Yen: Chapter 33

by Daniel Harris

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Ben checked out the train compartment. There was a well-dressed elderly German couple. The man appeared to be blind, or have compromised sight. His wife was reading to him in German from Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*. She was speaking very quietly and he was listening very attentively. From her place in the book Ben gauged that it was about the point in the story where Adrian Leverkühn was making, or about to make, his pact with the devil. Ben remembered an Argentinean composer, Mauricio Kagel, who tried to write a composition in the style of Adrian Leverkühn, as described by Thomas Mann. It was certainly an interesting artistic challenge. Ben never learned if it ever received a performance.

The other three people in the compartment were two teenage boys sniggering at a Robert Crumb comic and a studious looking twenty-something girl who was reading a paperback copy of Georges Perec's *La Disparition* [*The Disappearance*]. This was the book Perec wrote without using the letter "e". Ben always associated such lipogrammatic tricks as trivial, since musicians, especially those playing modal music, frequently performed with a limited number of pitches. There were Indian ragas with only five or six notes, but it didn't curtail the musicians' expressive abilities.

Ben pulled his copy of *Libération* from his pack. He reread the article about the *Affair Corse*, but could not glean any clues that would explain why Arris sent him to Yolande's restaurant. He read

nothing that was atypical for a story about a restaurant bombing. The usual political motives were speculated. Considerable space was devoted to Yolande's distress at having her restaurant bombed. She promised to reopen for her customers and friends as soon as possible. Several neighbors gave glowing accounts of her cuisine

The train was a slow local. They were at the third stop and they had just crossed the Var River, which defined the western outskirts of Nice.

-This will take forever. I'll never get to Antibes to meet Isabella, much less make it to Marseille to deliver the picture and then catch the overnight train to Paris. I may have to call Jean-Claude Lyon, the orchestra manager of the Monte Carlo orchestra, and tell him I won't be there until Saturday. No one will be pleased, especially the composer Hans Hausenstockmann.

-Excuse me. Does this train stop at Antibes? Ben asked the girl next to him who was reading the *La Disparition*.

-Oui, monsieur, she replied.

-Merci, mademoiselle.

When the train pulled into Biot, a lone passenger boarded the train. She was a tall majestic black woman carrying a trombone case.

-Jesus, I can't believe it, that's Clovis "Balls" Pennymaker, Ben said to himself.

Ben stood up and went into the corridor. There she was. She spotted Ben at the same moment he saw her.

-Ben Clarone! Hey, brother, what are you doing on this pokey local train?

-Sister, it's a long story, but what are you doing?

-Going to Antibes to meet the old man who has taken the kids to swimming lessons. Then it's dinner and on to an orchestra gig in Cannes. Ben, I see you are a soloist next month with the Monte Carlo Orchestra. There are posters all over the area.

-Aren't your kids too young for swimming lessons? asked Ben changing the subject.

-Ben it's been almost ten years since I left your band. My kids are nine, seven and five, plenty old enough to learn to swim. You remember my husband, the sculptor Michel Marteau? He insists that since we live near the sea, the children must learn to swim.

Ben met Clovis in 1965 when he heard her on 125th street next to the Apollo Theater playing in the *Joyous Rejoicing of Our Lord, Jesus Christ Trombone Choir*. She was the loudest and wickedest trombonist he'd ever heard. He had just arrived in New York City and was putting together a New York version of his octet, *Pieces of Eight*. She was the voice he was missing in the group. He asked her to come to a rehearsal. Ben was surprised she showed up. Ben had put up with a lot of BS from the guys in the band about taking on a chick trombone player, but when she started playing, everyone shut up fast. Clovis took the band to a new level.

She was over six feet tall and big, but perfectly proportioned. She played a bass trombone. Her top end made Ed the trumpet player in the group work to add an additional octave to his range. No matter how fast and tortured the melodies that Ben wrote, she kept up with Ben the first time and every time. She was a jewel. She and Ben had been an item for a while, but Ben realized she was serious about relationships. He was not about to commitment to a relationship with a woman at that time. For Ben, the band was more important.

They played at the Antibes Jazz Festival in 1966 and Clovis met Michel Marteau, a French sculptor, after the concert. At the end of the tour, Clovis went back to France and Ben was looking for a trombone player. By then, Clovis had put her name in the music history books. Marteau carved a three times life-size nude sculpture of her emerging from the cliffs near one of the beaches west of Cannes. It was a famous tourist stop on the *Côte d'Azur*.

-Clovis, I see you still carry the 'bone case and you look great. Do you get many gigs here?

-Not many jazz gigs, but I play at a lot of concerts in Nice, Monte Carlo and Cannes. I play with a couple of groups, but none like the old *Pieces of Eight*. That was the best musical experience of my life. I'll always be grateful to you for taking me on and teaching me so

much about music. But I've got the motherhood in me, and I couldn't live that life now.

-Well, if you change your mind, *Pieces of Eight*, still lives and I would put you in the band in a heartbeat.

-Ben, you know I don't think I could move back to New York. We have a good life here with a lot of respect from the local people. The schools treat my children right. Michel makes good money and doesn't have to teach. He has commissions for the next ten years. We own our home and Michel's studio. Life is good, though I do wish my kids spoke better English. Maybe we'll send them to summer camp in America. But then they would be Black with all that baggage. In France they are just Michel and Clovis's brown children, hardly as dark as a lot of the local white people.

There was a long pause. Clovis smiled at Ben. Ben stared at his shoes and embarrassingly remembered her walking proudly across his bedroom naked and slipping into his bed. She could have been the Queen of Egypt.

The train's arrival in Antibes was signaled by the squeal of brakes and *ritardando* of the clickety-clack of the wheels on the track.

-Are you meeting someone, Ben? If not, we can drive you where you need to go.

-Actually, Isabella Santizzarre and a friend of hers are supposed to meet me.

-You know Isabella? asked Clovis.

-Hardly, I befriended her grandmother and one of the stewardesses, Claudia Monschard, on my flight from JFK. They are meeting me here at the train station.

-Isabella is a great champion of Michel's work. She is quite beautiful, but a very tough businesswoman. She has broken many hearts and emptied the wallets of enough art patrons to feed and house my family for decades. My advice, Ben, knowing you like I do is, do not get involved with her under any circumstances. Keep it on the up-and-up. Isabella has ruined more than one suitor, lover and business partner.

-Thanks for the advice, but she is an irresistible object of sexual desire.

-Heed my advice, Ben. You are a friend. I don't want to see you get hurt. I might add that Claudia is the ex-wife, though who knows how ex, of the infamous art dealer, Dan Arris. As we use to say when promoters were giving us a hard time, keep you mouth shut and play your horn. Those two women could destroy you.

-Zoë's done a pretty good job. I came back from a three-month global tour to find myself homeless, no horns, and she had our Russian Blue cat, Tuschka, euthanized.

-Oh, no! Not Tuschka. I know she was your favorite cat.

-Don't remind me, I might breakdown. The last couple of years Tuschka was my best friend. Zoë was getting more and more distant.

-I'm sorry, Ben.

They exited the train and walked to the front of the station. Isabella's big Mercedes was parked near the station entrance. Ben and Clovis walked up to the car. Isabella got out and walked up to Clovis. The two women gave the requisite three air kisses and a no body contact hug.

-Ben, may I introduce Isabella, said Clovis. Isabella, Ben. Ben, Isabella.

-We've sort of met. I taxied Ben to downtown Nice with one of his friends. I think he knows my grandmother better than me, said Isabella. She motioned to Claudia in the back seat of the Mercedes.

-Clovis. Ben. My friend, Claudia Monschaud, who I think you both know. She hurt her ankle on the flight over.

-I'm waiting for Michel, said Clovis, so don't let me keep you. He should be here with the kids any minute. They are at the pool for swimming lessons.

Isabella opened the trunk and Ben carefully stowed his pack next to the box with the painting in it and Claudia's roll-around stewardess's suitcase.

-Ben you'll have to ride in front with me. Claudia has her leg propped up on the back seat. She's also a little schnockered.

Ben looked in the back seat and saw Claudia with her bad leg stretched out on the back seat. Ben could see all the way up to pay dirt. She was wearing some frilly panties. Her ankle was wrapped in multiple layers of ACE bandages.

Isabella was wearing a green sundress that revealed her figure to advantage. As soon as she got behind the wheel, she kicked off her pumps. With a wave to Clovis, they exited the station and headed toward the highway. They rode in silence as Isabella expertly piloted the big car through traffic, rotaries and onto Autoroute A8.

Ben watched Isabella drive. She was going at least fifteen miles an hour over the speed limit and changing lanes quickly and smoothly. Staring straight ahead she asked, Ben, how do you know Yousef Al Sidran?

-I don't. Never seen him before. Dan Arris told me to deliver this painting to him.

-He's a rather notorious character in the art world.

Ben noticed she never took her eyes off the road. Ben like the way her braless right breast pressed against the bodice of her dress. The nipple was just nascent through the fabric.

-I guess some people think I'm notorious in the music world.

-Well, there is good notorious like you, Ben, and then there is bad notorious like my ex-husband, Claudia said drunkenly.

-So does that make two good notorious, or two bad notorious among the three of us, Al Sidran, Arris and myself? Ben asked.

-You're outgunned, interjected Isabella.

They rode in silence. Isabella turned on the radio to Canal 2. A string quartet was playing some very abstract music.

-What is this shit? Isabella said snapping off the radio after thirty seconds.

-Elliot Carter, the dean of contemporary American music. That's his string quartet number two. It's famous for its rhythmic modulations. It's very difficult to grasp in thirty seconds. Influenced by French composer Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*, which translates as *The Hammer Without A Master*. End of music lesson.

-Did Boulez compose it for Michel Marteau, that proto-crypto-pseudo-Rodin of French sculptors?

-No, chuckled Ben. It's a setting of a poem by surrealist French poet, René Char.

This Isabella had a sharp tongue, thought Ben.

-Ben, how do you know Marteau? Claudia slurred from the back seat.

-He stole my trombone, Ben replied.

-What you mean, stole your trombone? Claudia asked adding a hiccup to the word stole.

-Michel Marteau seduced, Clovis "Balls" Pennymaker, who was the trombonist in my group *Pieces of Eight* when we were on tour in Antibes in 1966.

-Why the name "Balls", Claudia asked.

-She played with a huge ballsy sound. Few men can play like that, and certainly not with the speed she could. She also had a preference for fondling men's...

-Enough interrupted Isabella. Keep it clean in my car.

-Sorry, Ben answered.

-That's the second time I've had to censor you, Ben. Unless you want to walk, keep it clean. No demeaning talk about women. Got it?

-Understood.

-What was it Clovis said, "keep your mouth shut and just play your horn," remembered Ben. He looked out at the same old international superhighway dull scenery. Here I am in a car with two babes, one drunk and one mean. He thought about the few nights he and Clovis had together. No artifice in her. He broke her heart, but she had instinct enough to know it was a better than trying to force something with too much potential for failure. There probably weren't a dozen women in the world like Clovis. I sure hope Marteau appreciates her.

Maybe Clovis will come to my concert and bring her kids. That would be interesting to see if they take after Marteau, who is a very muscular quiet rock hammerer, or if they take after their mother,

who is sharp as a tack with more talent and moxie than anyone should be allowed to have in a life.

-Isabella, I have to use the potty, cried Claudia from the rear seat.

-There's a place just up the road. We'll be there in five minutes.

Can you wait?

-I'm sick to my stomach. You should pull over right now!

Isabella pulled over to the right lane and brought the car to a stop under an overpass.

-Ben, help me get Claudia out of the back seat and then turn your back to us.

-Yes, boss, said Ben imitating Rochester from the Jack Benny Show.

-Very funny, snapped Isabella.

Ben got in the back seat from the left side of the car and Isabella from the right side. They slid Claudia out the right rear door.

-Look out 'Bella, choked Claudia. She let go, missing herself and Isabella but painting the gravel next to the car.

-Ben, there are some tissues in the glove box. Get them. Isabella ordered.

Ben slid across the front seat and opened the glove box. There was a small box of tissues. He could hear that Claudia was still at it. He opened the door and handed Isabella the tissue box.

After a few more wretched minutes, Claudia said she was finished. Ben held her under her armpits and pulled her back into the back seat.

-I am so embarrassed, Claudia said meekly.

-It could have been worse. You should be OK now, offered Ben.

-I was just so bummed about the ankle and the pressure of seeing the ex-husband Saturday that I just drank too much, too fast.

-You'll feel better now, said Isabella as she pulled the car back onto the highway.

They drove on in silence. Ben could hear Claudia weeping in the back seat.

-Would you like some gum to freshen your mouth, or a sucking candy? Isabella asked.

-I think that would be good for me, sniffed Claudia.

-Ben, in my purse are some candies and some gum. Get some for Claudia.

Ben took the large purse from the floor and opened it. Looking in women's handbags was not high on his list of things to do. He always felt it was an invasion of privacy, especially since the time Zoë had asked him to get something from her purse and he found several used condoms wrapped up in a pair of her panties. He often wondered if it was a set-up to give him a message, or a typical ditsy Zoë error. Anyway, since that time he was loath to look in women's handbags. Yet, here he was groping in a strange woman's handbag for gum and candy.

Isabella's handbag seemed fuller than most women's. There were cosmetics, notebooks, address books, cards, old letters, telegrams, hairbrushes, combs, agenda, pens, pencils, and the usual impedimenta of the professional female. Ben also noticed a new box of tampons with one missing. It might explain Isabella's snippiness, thought Ben.

-I think they are in the outside compartment, directed Isabella.

-Did she want me to discover the cause of her bitchiness? Ben wondered. He opened the outside compartment. There was her wallet, two packs of gum and a tin of French anise breath refreshers. He handed the gum and the tin back to Claudia.

Claudia's make-up was smeared from her weeping and she look absolutely forlorn and hapless.

-I'd go easy on those pastis flavored candies, offered Ben.

-They are actually good for settling the stomach, said Isabella.

Claudia gingerly put one of the anise-flavored candies in her mouth. Within a few minutes her color returned to her face.

-I think Isabella is correct about those candies. They have really perked me up.

-Don't take too many, ordered Isabella. Switch to the gum.

They drove on in silence. Traffic started to become heavier as they neared Aix-en-Provence. They followed signs to A7 and headed south to Marseille.

-What address did Arris give you, Ben? Isabella asked.

-21 rue de République.

-I believe that is Al Sidran's studio, not his residence, said Isabella.

-I think that is correct, said Claudia, who had been sleeping for the past half hour and now sounded more like her usual self. I was there a few times with Arris. It's a climb up to his studio because it is on the top floor and there is no elevator.

-I can't park on that street, so I'll drop you off. You meet Claudia at Gare St Charles, no later than seven tonight. There is an express train that leaves at seven fifteen. It is a fourteen-hour trip to Gare de Lyon in Paris.

-How do I get to Gare St. Charles?

-Take a taxi. You could walk, but if you get lost or mugged, you will miss your train.

Isabella pulled up to the curb in front of 21 rue de Republic. She got out of the car and opened the trunk. She handed Ben his pack and the box with the painting.

-Thank you for your help Isabella. Maybe I can return the favor some day.

-If you can help me procure some Gringovitch paintings, it would be greatly appreciated.

-I'm very close to him. I'll see what I can do.

Ben watched the Mercedes pull away. He turned to enter 21 rue de République and saw at a brass plaque by the front door of the building: YOUSEF AL SIDRAN et GIROLAMO DENTE, DÉCOUVRIR ART.

-Find Art? Curious thought Ben.

To be continued.

