

Five Million Yen: Chapter 34

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Ben pushed the buzzer for DÉCOUVRIR ART. There was no answer. He waited a good thirty seconds and pushed the buzzer again.

-36C7, a voice said from the speaker by the buzzers

-Yeah, I'll show you some C7 Mambo, Ben said out loud.

Ben punched the code into the keypad by the door and it clicked open. He looked for a building directory, but there wasn't one. He had been told it was on the top floor. He started the climb.

-Jesus, I'm going to burn off all those succulent oysters just climbing these stairs, thought Ben. I was saving them for love, he said to himself with a grin.

Arriving at the top of the stairs, Ben spotted the same brass sign on the door he had seen on the brass plaque in front of the building: **YOUSEF AL-SIDRAN et GIROLAMO DENTE, DÉCOUVRIR ART**

There was an ornate Renaissance-inspired brass-and-ceramic knocker on the door. Ben gave it a couple of sharp raps, but couldn't hear any movement behind the door, yet he had the feeling he was being watched. He looked for a surveillance camera, didn't see one. There was a small "peep" hole in the door. It was dark.

Ben thought there must be someone here, they gave me the code. He rapped the knocker again much harder.

Nothing

How about a little C7 mambo, he thought, and he rapped "shave and a haircut, two bits," which was the same rhythm as a clave, the unit of time in Latin music.

The door opened.

-You must be Ben Adoyan, said a very slight athletic looking man wearing a beret and a form-fitting sharkskin suit over a turtleneck shirt.

-Yes, I'm Ben Adoyan. I'm looking for Yousef al-Sidran.

-I'm your man. Come in, Mr. Ben Adoyan.

Ben walked into the room. It was an art gallery with paintings on the walls, easels and some smaller paintings leaning against a large desk that faced the front door.

-Welcome to Yousef al-Sidran et Girolamo Dente, Déouvrir Art. I'm Yousef al-Sidran. You can call me Joe or even Al if you like, though don't use Al around Arabic speakers, they'll think it disrespectful.

-As you guessed, I'm Ben Adoyan, said Ben looking around the room. To Ben, the setting was a gallery of masterpieces from the last three hundred years, maybe longer ago than that.

-Do you have the Gringovitch painting? asked al-Sidran

-It's in the box.

-Well, let's look at it.

Ben handed the picture box to al-Sidran

Al-Sidran pulled out a switchblade knife from his pocket and proceeded to carefully cut open the box. Ben could tell it was razor sharp by the way it cut through the packing tape and cardboard.

-You'll have to excuse the knife, but the neighborhood has some shifty characters that think nothing of trying to mug a man in a suit after dark, explained al-Sidran.

-Wait a minute, said Ben raising his voice. Why do you speak such good American English? The last person I encountered who spoke English like that was in Nice three hours ago. He turned out to be a shamus.

-A cop? Were you followed here, shot back al-Sidran tensely.

-No, I gave him the slip. He fell for an old ruse. They think I'm a dumb musician. I came here by train and car. I didn't have the painting with me until I met the car.

-Ah, smart.

-You haven't answered the question, why is your English so good and so American.

-I grew up in Kenosha, Wisconsin; my father was an engineer at American Motors. After high school, I went to Cooper Union. They said I was a child prodigy.

-Ah, that explains it, but why are you here in Marseille?

-It's a good place to do business, any kind of business.

-And what is your business may I ask?

-My partner and I discover art, in a manner of speaking.

-I read that, but what exactly does "discover art" mean?

-Just that. I think you will know the answer soon enough, said al-Sidran, pulling the painting from the box.

Al Sidran removed a painting from one of the display easels and replaced it with the new Gringovitch painting. Ben watched Al Sidran stand back, admiring the painting from a distance. He moved close to the canvas to inspect the details and then stepped back for another long view.

-It's a terrific painting, said Ben.

-Yes, it is one of Gringovitch's best. Too bad we will destroy it to get to the Gorky forgery underneath.

-Just out of curiosity, Mr. Ben Adoyan, who drove you here?

-Isabella Santizzare. You can call me Ben.

-Ah, yes, the she-devil of the art world. I'll wager she told you she would kill for a Gringovitch painting.

-She sure would like one. I would love to jump her bones.

-Well, Ben, many have jumped her bones and broken their necks in the process. My advice: Stay away from her. She is the Devil's own. She can hurt you badly in a dozen ways.

-She was petty bitchy driving here.

-That's nothing. She'll pussy-whip you and then destroy you. There will be no trace of you left, but she'll make out big-time. And don't cozy up to her grandmother, Ida, she's her teacher in treachery.

-Sounds pretty grim, al-Sidran, mumbled Ben.

Al-Sidran turned and opened a door to another room.

-Giro, I have a very interesting painting for you to see, said Sidran speaking in Italian and almost shouting.

An elderly Italian gentleman in a painting smock came into the room. Ben assumed this was al-Sidran's partner, Girolamo Dente. The gentleman wore bifocal glasses and had illuminated magnifying goggles perched on his forehead.

His attire was almost a costume of a sixteenth century gentleman. He could have been an actor in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

-Ben may I present Girolamo Dente. Giro, as we call him, is the most famous unknown art copier in the world, al-Sidran explained in English.

-Girolamo Dente, may I present to you Ben Adoyan, said al-Sidran switching to Italian. The old man gave a short bow.

-Giro, Ben is a world famous musician who just delivered the Gringovitch/Gorky painting we spoke about, al-Sidran explained in Italian.

Dente walked over to the Gringovitch on the easel. He examined it closely without saying a word.

-Whoever painted this doesn't know anything about materials. This paint will peel off in three weeks, proclaimed Giro in very strange Italian.

-Giro, that's the idea. He painted over an Arshile Gorky painting. We are supposed to clean this up and deliver it to Dan Arris in a couple of weeks.

Giro didn't acknowledge al-Sidran's remarks.

-Well, I have a train to catch. But Sidran, we have some business to conduct.

-Ben, you are correct. But, I have never received the portion of the note Arris was supposed to have sent me. I will have to go to the post office and check my post office box, and I must hurry or the post office will be closed.

-This is serious, Sidran. I fulfilled my part of the bargain and I need that part of the 100-franc note to be able to get my pay from Arris for the delivery. You're not pulling my chain are you?

-No, no. I'm an honest businessman. This is a piece of business. I feel badly, but I haven't received the lower right third of the 100-franc note. Arris was supposed to send it to this address, not my post office box. I'm on my way now. Stay here until I return. I won't be twenty minutes.

-Well, hurry. I have to catch a seven o'clock train to Paris.

Al-Sidran, took a set of keys from his desk and left the office. Ben could hear him running down the stairs.

Ben turned and looked at the old guy, but didn't know what to say.

-The old man asked Ben in very strange Italian: Do you speak Italian?

-Yes, but I have trouble understanding your accent.

-It is a Venetian dialect. I will try to speak normal Italian.

-Grazie mille, Signore Dente.

-Why are you bringing this picture?

-I did it for the money. I had some misfortune, Ben replied in Italian.

-This is a very fine painting. It is a shame to destroy it, though it will destroy itself in three weeks.

-Sidran said you were a master copyist. Can you make a copy in oils?

-Of course, but why?

-I have a powerful friend who would pay a lot of money for a copy of this painting in oils.

-Yes, that is possible. I can do it, but it will take some time. Not as long as a big painting, but still at least a week. I can use contemporary materials, so those material issues that Yousef attends to won't be necessary. There is also no frame to duplicate.

Ben was having trouble understanding the man's accent. He seemed like a relic from an older age. He also gave off a lot of heat. The room seemed hot even though the windows were open and it was cool outside.

Ben decided to push his luck. Can you make a copy without al-Sidran knowing? Can you make a perfect copy for us to sell?

-Yes, that could be possible. I have another studio in my home. I know Yousef is going to Japan next week. I will be able to do it then.

-I have a buyer who would pay big money for a Gringovitch original.

-Signore, it is not the original, which will self-destruct in a few weeks, but the oil copy will be the new original. But do you know this Gringovitch?

-Yes, we were boyhood friends in Chicago and are still best friends.

-To be successful, we will have to let him know that we are doing this. Otherwise Gringovitch will make a big scandal.

-Yes, don't worry. I will give you 25%, I'll take 25% and Gringovitch will get 50%.

-40% for me. I'm doing the work. 10% for you.

-35%, countered Ben.

-Yes, I will accept that, said the old man after some thought.

Ben didn't mention that he intended to take full sexual advantage of Isabella Santizzare and use her to legitimize the painting by purchasing it for a museum.

The old man graciously extended his hand. Ben took it and gave it a firm handshake. The hand was almost hot to the touch.

- It's a deal, Ben proclaimed.

- Yes. It's a deal, Giro replied. Come back in a week and I will have the painting ready.

-If the copy you make is as good as promised, I can bring you two other Gringovitch paintings.

-I don't understand your American Italian.

-There are more paintings to copy.

-Yes, it is always like this. Let me show you.

The old man led Ben into the other room, which was a painting studio with bright light, both artificial and natural. On an easel was a big Rothko painting.

-Do you know this artist?

-Of course, Ben replied, this is Mark Rothko.

-Do you understand the find art business?

-No, I never heard of it, replied Ben.

-This is the original. I made a copy, which was returned to a warehouse in New York City where a major museum stores it when it is not on loan or exhibit. This original will go back to the owner, who has taken a big tax deduction for donating the picture to a major museum. Meanwhile his heirs will have the original in their possession. This is the art world. Many museums have my copies displayed as originals in their collections. The originals remain in the family's possession. We only do this with donated paintings. If museums sell them, so be it. The super rich who hold these paintings never let them out of the family. I've copied everything from Titian to Jackson Pollock. I finished varnishing a famous Turner for the Tate last month. The original went back to the owner in Knightsbridge.

-Do you make a small mistake in the copy so you can identify the original? asked Ben remembering Arris's lesson in forgery at Gringovitch's studio.

-Of course, that is my invention, but I won't reveal more trade secrets.

-There are three Gringovitch paintings we should copy. This one, which is called *Abstract with Yellow*. There is another one in Nice in my bank vault called *The Black and the Red*. I will bring it to you when I pick up *Abstract with Yellow*. The third is called *Big Wave*. Gringovitch has it in Roma.

-I cannot follow your Italian, but I think I understand. The titles of the paintings are meaningless to me. I have no English. Do you know if Gringovitch varnishes his oil paintings?

-I don't know, but I do know he has exhibited some pictures that were still wet. A third party may have varnished them when they were dry.

-It can take up to two years for this painting to dry with all the heavy impasto.

-That is his style.

-Yes, I see.

The old man put the illuminated magnifier over his glasses and examined the painting with close care.

-He used very cheap brushes, but then he was working with this student ephemeral medium. You can see where he used chunks of dried pigment to build up the surface. I will make it a splendid oil painting.

-Maestro, how do I contact you to learn when the painting is ready?

-There are cards on Yousef's desk. Take one. I am here from first light until the light fails every day including Sunday.

Ben put a couple of the cards in his pocket and one in his wallet.

-How far is the post office?

-A few blocks. Yousef should be here soon

-How long would it take me to travel to the Gare St. Charles from here, asked Ben.

-It is a twenty-minute walk, but you should take a taxi. Bad people harass travelers around the train station. There is a taxi stand at the corner.

Ben could hear steps on the stairs.

-That sounds like Yousef now, said the old man. I recognize his step.

They could hear a key in the door and in walked al-Sidran out of breath from running up the stairs.

-I just made it to the post office. The counters were closed, but the box area was still open.

He put a big pile of mail on his desk.

-Ben I'm, sorry, but I did not find an envelope from Arris, he said.

-That really blows, Sidran. How am I going to get paid?

-Maybe it will come tomorrow. You can stay at my home and we can check the post tomorrow.

-Negatori, on that. I *have* to be in Paris by tomorrow noon to meet the paymaster.

-How about if I write you a receipt?

-I don't know if that will work, but I do know I have to leave to catch the express train to Paris.

Al-Sidran sat at his desk and wrote out a receipt. When he finished writing, he embossed it with the company seal.

-I'm sorry Ben, this is the best I can do for now. It's not my fault that the letter didn't get here in time.

-I know that, but it puts me in a very difficult position of being the courier without the agreed-upon delivery receipt.

-Yes, I know, but I think there won't be a problem when I call Arris. I'll tell him you delivered as promised.

Ben put the written receipt in his wallet and turned to go.

-Well, I have to take a train, Ben said with a laugh.

-What's so funny, asked al Sidran.

-The bandleader, Lawrence Welk, on one of his television broadcasts announced that his band would play a composition by the famous Negro musician, Duke Ellington. He announced the song as *Take A Train*, not *Take The A Train*, which of course is a New York City subway train that runs from Far Rockaway, Queens to Harlem and beyond, on Manhattan's west side. Jazz musicians have adopted that gaffe with great *freudenschade*, said Ben with a touch of flair

-Hey, my parents were great fans of the Lawrence Welk Show. It was pretty hokey though.

-I'd love to stay and BS about ricky-tic music, but I gotta run. It's been interesting meeting you. I'm sure we will meet again, hopefully under more satisfactory circumstances.

-Ben, remember, stay away from Isabella Santizzare.

-Got it. Ciao, Maestro Dente.

-Ciao, Signore Adoyan, replied the old man wearily.

Ben opened the door and started toward the stairs with his pack on his back. Thank you, Gabe and Roi de Quoi, for saving my ass, he said to himself as he descended the stairs two-at-a-time. Eight hundred kilometers and a few hours and I'll be Ben Clarone again, he mused.

At the corner he grabbed a taxi and was soon at Gare St. Charles. It was one minute to seven. He looked at the arrivals board and saw that the seven-fifteen express train from Ventimiglia with a

destination of Paris was late. He began to look for Claudia. At track seven he saw a woman in a wheelchair and walked over to her.

As he approached the wheelchair, he saw that it was not Claudia, but an elderly woman.

-OK, where is this bitch, Claudia, he said aloud to himself.

He turned and looked around the station. He could not see her. He checked the departure board and saw that the next train to Paris was an express and would leave on track five.

Just as he was about to walk to track five, someone grabbed his arms from behind and planted a kiss on his neck. He could smell Claudia's perfume.

-Damn, you scared the bejesus out of me.

Claudia was standing next to him with no Ace bandages. She had a very happy smile on her face and grabbed Ben's arm. She was not the miserable drunken wretch that was in the backseat of Isabella's Mercedes.

-You are my escort, Ben.

-So what happened to the injured ankle?

-Ben, I've been trying to trap you since that Sarah Bernhardt act I pulled on the airplane. There's nothing wrong with my ankle.

-You had a lot of people fooled including some doctors.

-Not really, the doctors just played along with my complaints. They knew if I were really hurt, I would scream when they manipulated my ankle.

-So how late is our train going to be?

-Ben, I don't know and I don't care. I have the room at the Ritz from tomorrow morning until Arris arrives Saturday night. He's traveling from Paris to London as we speak. He will be back Saturday night for a banquet. I will be his date.

-What possessed you to marry such an unlikable guy?

-Money. Plain and simple. Money. The stewardess life was getting to me. I met him on the New York-London route. We had a few nights of sex, drugs, great food and five star accommodations. He can charm the pants off any girl. And he got into mine, and my heart, big time. No sleazy airport hotels or motels. He gave me the

best. After the FBI arrested him, I found out he was a forger. There was a long trial that ended in a plea bargain. Arris went to jail. When he got out of jail, he was a changed man. He was mean. He decided to prove that he was smarter than the law and anyone in the art business. Because he was my husband and a convicted felon, I lost my job. His last act of kindness was giving me a divorce and paying off someone so I could get my job back at Pan Am.

-So, are you still an item? You know, like conjugal?

-No, Ben, those days are over. We are barely friends. He invited me to the stay at the Ritz because I would tease him that if he were so powerful, he would book us into the Ritz. Now that it's over, he has.

An announcement came over the PA that the express train from Ventimiglia was entering the station and would arrive on track five. They walked to track five, Ben with his backpack and Claudia with her stewardess roll-around. When the train entered the station, they validated their tickets and walked down the quai to their assigned car.

-Claudia, how did you get the same car as me?

-Dumb luck I guess. I just asked for a wagon-lit. I said my husband was meeting me at the train. I gave him your name, Ben Adoyan, and he booked me into the same sleeping compartment. A little cleavage helped. I would be in trouble if you were traveling under your real name.

-How did you get so smart?

-I travel a lot Ben. I don't bed-down with a lot of men, but I've been all over the world on Pan Am. I've been waiting for you since that London trip.

-Touché.

-Ben, I hope for more than touché tonight.

-There could be two dirty old men sharing our compartment. Touching and kissing may be it.

-I think not, my push-up French bra may guarantee a private ride to Paris.

-Don't get me too excited, I haven't been with a woman in over three months. I could be Quick Draw McGraw.

-It's a twelve-hour plus ride Ben, and then we have the Ritz. Go slow, I need comfort

Claudia's perfume and enticing good looks overcame Ben's image of her being sick in Isabella's car. She was a desirable trophy who looked good, smelled good and had a very sophisticated, yet earthy, presence.

To be continued.

