

Five Million Yen: Chapter 35

by Daniel Harris

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Ben slipped out of his couchette bunk, stumbled as he pulled up his trousers, opened the compartment door and headed to the toilet. Claudia lay softly sleeping on the other lower bunk. She looked totally relaxed to Ben. No one was sharing their First Class four-berth couchette compartment and they had lain naked together most of the night. Claudia had two bottles of wine with her and they had finished one and started the second

After Ben left the toilet he went to the exit and looked out the exit door windows. The French landscape revealed itself in a slowly unfolding silhouette of gentle hills, ponds and river reflections. Ben assumed the trees were changing colors and probably during the day it was a colorful spectacle.

Their lovemaking had been awkward at first with the two of them in one small couchette berth. Claudia was more adept at the situation than Ben, but eventually after a couple of false starts and funny moments real pleasure became the order of the day. Ben prepared Claudia with his best repertoire of endearments, teases and caresses. Claudia was very skilled at pleasing a partner and she was rewarded by Ben's attention to her responses. Their second and third engagements were more forceful and delved deeper into each other's physical and emotional being. Claudia was helpless under the power of Ben's movements and stimulations. He took his full measure of pleasure.

Ben reflected on this and appreciated the serenity a woman could give him. The stresses of the last few months had taken their toll,

but now it had been washed away by Claudia's ministrations of affection and desire. In a few hours, he would be Ben Clarone with his contrabass clarinet and ready for whatever Austrian composer Hausenstockmann sent his way. It seemed forever since he had held the contrabass clarinet in his hands, but actually it was only two days since he spent almost a day at Sal Frompini's shop having his contrabass tweaked by the best repairman in New York City. He knew he was up to any challenge that Austrian martinet would throw his way.

He returned to their couchette compartment. He was thirsty and hungry. The stresses of the last week and then the carnal release through Claudia's sexuality stirred his appetite for food and drink. Ben remembered that the open second wine bottle was in Claudia's large handbag. He gingerly opened it and removed the wine bottle. He looked down and saw the telegram from Arris. He took it and the wine bottle out of the compartment into the hallway.

There it was. The telegram from Arris:

SENDER: D ARRIS, MAIN BROOKLYN NY RECIPIENT: CLAUDIA
MONSCHAUD OPS PANAM WORLDPORT NYC

CM STOP EYES ON BC STOP FOLLOW BC ACTION NICE STOP
PARIS RITZ SAT STOP DA

Just how true were Claudia's responses? Was she still married to Arris? Was she one of his agents? What really was their relationship? Was she deceitful in her denial of Arris? Or was she faking her affection, taking her pleasures as part of a bigger conspiracy? What kind of mole was she? Was she working for Isabella? Who was in charge here? Arris? Gringovitch? Gabe Benjamin? Isabella? Lieutenant Harold Smith in New York? Who was lying, who was telling the truth.

Ben was becoming delirious with the possibilities of deceit and intrigue. He drained the last quarter liter from the wine bottle in two gulps and returned to his berth after locking the door.

Claudia was still asleep, softly breathing through her mouth. Looking at her, Ben didn't know whether to kill her or kiss her.

-Christ, he said to himself, I feel like Othello looking at Desdemona: *I kiss thee ere I killed thee*. Shakespeare had nothing on his current drama. All the release Ben experienced was now gone. He was a haunted and maybe a hunted man. This whole art caper, he thought, may have me throwing away my talents, my pearl of life, more precious than this ignoble tribe of thieves, players, forgers and double-dealers who surround me like a death shroud.

-Jesus, he said to himself, I am getting morose.

Ben climbed into his bunk, put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling while he listened to the train clickety-clack towards Paris.

-Are you awake, Ben? asked Claudia.

-Yes, Claudia.

-I have to use the bathroom. Can you help me up and hand me my skirt and blouse?

Ben got out of his bunk. He found the clothing in a pile on the floor.

-Do you want your underwear?

-No, just enough to be decent.

Ben handed her what she wanted. She slipped into her skirt and put on her blouse. Ben could not contain himself. He reached around her from the back and weighed each of her breasts in his hands. Claudia leaned her head back and arched her back, luxuriating in Ben's touch on her breasts and nipples.

-Wait lover man, I'll be right back.

-I do believe they are the same weight, Claudia.

-No, Ben. Check more carefully and you will find the one over my heart is a little bigger.

Ben gave her breasts a gentle lift.

-You could be correct, but they are both ripe for ravishment.

-Let me go Ben, or we'll have a problem on our hands. She could feel his erection between her cheeks.

Claudia slipped from Ben's grasp and scurried out the compartment door. Ben wondered if Claudia knew that *Lover Man* was a ballad made famous by Billy Holiday, or if she knew the lyrics?

It was an inordinate amount of time before Claudia returned. Ben was almost asleep when he heard Claudia's knock on the door. He lifted himself from the lower berth and opened the compartment door.

-Ben, darling. Hold me tight.

Ben sank down into his berth and Claudia landed on top of him.

-I have bad news. My roses have started.

-Roses?

-Yes, it's what the French women call their period. Our last few episodes brought it on. It happens. But all is not lost.

Claudia slipped off Ben and from her knees on the compartment floor; she unzipped his trousers and rejuvenated his erection. Her sense of tease was masterful. He exploded in a shattering orgasm.

-Don't say I don't love you, or mean it Mr. Clarone. I've wanted you for months, said Claudia with some bravado.

Ben pulled her down on his body and cradled her in his arms. With his left hand he caressed her hair. Her hair strands seemed larger than any he had known. Her hands were just below his shoulders. With his right hand he caressed her *mons* very lightly.

-Don't, Ben. If you keep it up, this will be messy.

-I just wanted to pleasure you.

-You will have many opportunities in a few days, lover man. Sleep now.

Claudia lifted herself off Ben and lay down on the berth across the aisle.

-Are you upset, Claudia?

-No, are you?

-I'm a happy man.

-I'm a happy woman. Do you think we can enjoy Paris together?

-Some day soon, Claudia, but I have to be in Nice for a rehearsal tonight. When we get to Paris, I can escort you to the Ritz, but then I have to meet someone to get my payment for delivering the paintings and retrieve my contrabass clarinet that I need for the gig with the Monte Carlo Orchestra.

-You won't be able to stay with me at the Ritz today?

Ben waited a six beat silence before he answered.

-I've thought of everything, but I have to be on the plane to Nice from Orly at three. I will have just enough time to see you *to* the Ritz, but then I'm off on my mission.

-Ben, you could be leaving me in danger. I need you to protect me from Arris if he shows up drunk. He can be mean and get totally out of control. There is no mellow with him. I could be hurt, maybe beat up.

-Claudia, I think you are exaggerating. Arris can be a bully, but he's smart enough to know not to hurt you in the Ritz. As the ex-husband, he would be suspect one if something happened to you. Besides, isn't the room registered in his name?

-Yes, but still, I know him better than anyone. He's still bitter about the divorce. He is crazy. He might think that you and I are in league against him in this Gorky business. He asked me to watch you, so he will have a reason for his suspicions. I have a telegram from him in my purse.

-Yes, I know. I saw it on the plane. You know the old saying: Keep your friends close, your enemies closer. That's why he wanted you to tail me. We would be watching each other. I gather he knew we were attracted to each other from the incident three months ago.

-We were divorced by then, said Claudia.

-He must have considered you a business partner, didn't he? asked Ben.

-I guess. I owed him for getting me my job back. But, Ben, he wasn't jealous about sex. He could care less about sex. He wanted me for arm candy. His libido went into his work. He used women as a sexual tool. He didn't want to know about emotions, only, what he called, "the short friction well consummated."

-He sounds like a whacko, said Ben.

-He is, but he sure could show you a good time if he wanted something.

-Is the Ritz part of a good-time deal?

Claudia didn't respond. There was a protracted silence. Ben was almost asleep when she answered.

-Ben, I would never do anything to hurt you. I want you as a friend and life companion. I respect what you do too much to jeopardize it by conspiring against you with some international art thug like Dan Arris.

-Thank you Claudia. Ben got up from his berth and bent over her. Holding her head in his hands he gave her a soft kiss on her full lips. He went to give her another soft kiss on her closed eyes. Salty tears greeted his lips.

-*No woman, no cry*, sang Ben, imitating Bob Marley.

Claudia bust into sobs. Ben put his hand on her shoulder.

-Easy, easy. All will be good. Don't rush and don't fear the future, sweet woman.

-We'll see, Ben. She was breaking down. Ben found it pathetic and informative to witness.

Ben sat down on his bunk. He reached out and held her hand. It was warm and dry. Claudia finally stopped sobbing, but Ben suspected she was still weeping.

-Women, thought Ben to himself.

After some time, Claudia fell asleep. Ben placed her hand on her stomach and settled into his berth. His watch said five o'clock. They would be in Paris in three hours.

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Gare de Lyon was a bustle with national and international travelers, suburban commuters, Parisian commuters, and students. Smells of hot coffee, croissants and other morning confections mixed with the train smells of ozone, hot grease and the malodors of train stations.

Ben and Claudia made their way to the taxi stand.

-Ben I've never come into a city on a train. Isn't it romantic?

-Ah, yes flying bird. Arriving in a great city at a station like this is a special experience. Train travel is romantic unlike flying. Look at this building. It's an outstanding example of belle époque architecture. To paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, writing about entering the old Penn Station in New York City: *Arriving in Penn Station, we were like gods.*

Gare de Lyon has a first class brassiere right here in the station, Le Train Bleu. Next time, we will dine there. Unfortunately, they don't serve breakfast, or I'd take you there now. I'm starved.

-Poor Ben. You always seem to be hungry. Let's get a coffee and croissant.

They took a table at a large establishment that served fresh brioche and croissants. Ben ordered a café crème for Claudia, a double express for himself, a brioche and two croissants for the table.

-Ben this coffee is so good. What is it called?

-Café crème. It's more like hot milk with coffee. Take one of the croissants. I'll split the brioche with you. Brioche is good dipped into your café crème.

Ben ate his croissant and then his portion of the brioche. He was hungry and this staved off his immediate hunger, but he knew he would have to eat a real meal soon. It was going to be a long day.

Claudia dipped a piece of croissant into her café crème. As she ate it, a big smile came over her face.

-This is not like the croissants we serve on our flights. These are delicious, and this is only a railroad station cafeteria. How do they do it?

-Lots of butter, replied Ben. He wondered if she were faking it. She had to have eaten French croissants before. The more he heard and saw, the more he believed she was a mole.

-Do you think I can get into my room at the Ritz when I arrive? It is pretty early in the morning.

-I thought Arris was staying there. I'm sure his room would be available to you anytime you arrive.

-Yes, I suppose that is true.

They sat eating and looking at each other. To Ben, Claudia was certainly a handsome woman and a good bed partner, but he was getting more and more suspicious of her motives. The play-acting with the ankle was probably just one of her acting jobs. Ben looked at his watch.

-Claudia, if you are finished, we should be going. I have a lot of traveling around the city to do to complete my errands.

-Are you sure you can't stay with me a couple of hours at the Ritz? At least take a shower and shave.

-That's tempting, but I have too much to do. I know I need a shower, but there just isn't time. Let's grab a taxi and get you to the Ritz.

They left the table and walked to the taxi stand. Ben shouldered his backpack and pulled Claudia's suitcase behind him. There was a long line and only two taxis. It was twenty minutes before they scored a taxi.

-The Ritz, s'il vous plait, ordered Ben.

-Place Vendôme?

-Oui.

Ben guessed he and Claudia didn't look like the usual Ritz patrons to this driver.

They sat in silence. Ben noticed out the corner of his eye, that Claudia was weeping.

-I think she's going a little too far, thought Ben. The driver noticed it also in his rearview mirror.

When they arrived at the Ritz, a doorman opened Claudia's door and she got out.

Ben exited on the driver's side and followed him to the back of the car.

-How much?

-120.

-120?

-Oui, 100 for the fare and ten francs for each bag.

Ben gave him 120 francs. The driver glared at him.

-Look, pal, I put the bags in the trunk and I took them out. Twenty francs is your tip, said Ben in his best New York "up-yours" voice.

Ben went up the steps to Claudia. She seemed distressed and a little distant.

-Give me a hug, Ben.

-Of course, you think I was just going to run off?

-No, but I was hoping we could spend the morning together, she pouted.

-I would love to, but I have more than one piece of business to take care of, as you well know, replied Ben. I will be rehearsing with a mean-ass Kraut tonight until who knows what hour.

-When will I see you again?

-I don't know, but you know where I will be for the next three weeks, maybe more. I'm sure Isabella will have my number. I won't know it until I get there tonight.

-Don't let Isabella steal you from me.

-I don't think she likes me.

-You might be surprised.

They embraced for a long good-bye.

-Gotta run. See you soon, flying lady. No woman, no cry, he sang.

The doorman waited patiently as they finished their good-byes. Finally, Ben shouldered his pack and made his way to Rue Rivoli and the Concorde Metro station. He bought a carnet, entered the metro and took the number 1 train to Reuilly-Diderot. He left the station by the rear exit and walked down rue Chaligny.

He went into Hôtel Venise, a hotel he had stayed at many times. Gringovitch's Paris crib was two blocks away on rue Charenton. The patroness was like a second mother to him.

There was a new clerk behind the desk.

-Is Madame Douply here? Ben inquired of the clerk.

-She is out, he said in uncertain English.

-Do you have a room today? asked Ben in French.

-No, we do not. We are full.

-Ben asked for a piece of notepaper, wrote his name and a greeting to Madame Douply and her husband Henri.

-Please give this to Madame Douply. She is my godmother.
The clerk blanched.

Ben left and crossed rue Chaligny and entered a no star hotel.

Ben rang the service bell. A skinny middle-aged man came from a back room. He could have been a double for Simon Sketis, the night receptionist at Artists Studios SRO in New York, who was killed by the cat burglar Victor "Shadow" Ruiz while Ben was in a squad car with Lieutenant Harold Smith and Sergeant Claude Mulvihill. Déjà vu flooded Ben's mind.

-May I help you?

-I need a room for the day.

-You are not spending the night?

-No, I need to take a short rest and clean up.

-We can rent by the hour. It might be cheaper.

-Ok, how much until noon.

-That is two hours. 150 francs.

Ben signed the register, presented his Adoyan passport and gave the clerk 150 francs.

-Receipt please, demanded Ben.

-We don't give receipts.

-I need it for my taxes. I'm an American newspaper reporter.

The clerk reluctantly made out a receipt for 150 francs.

The clerk gave him the key to room 54.

-It's on the third floor next to the elevator.

Ben took the elevator to the third floor. When he opened the door his way was blocked by the chambermaid's cart.

-Jesus Christ, said Ben under his breath. He pushed the cart out of his way. Of course he pushed it so it blocked the door to room 54. He pushed it back in front of the elevator. The key worked easily.

The room looked made up and the bathroom was clean.

-At least I can take a shower, catch a few Z's and go get my money and my horn, thought Ben.

He decided to shower first. He stripped and started the shower. The water was hot, though the flow was miserly in the extreme. The only soap was the remains of a small hotel bar. He lathered up as well as he could, rinsed off and towed dry. While he was shaving there was a sound like a broken fire hose.

-What the Hell was that? Ben said in full voice.

The sound happened again. After checking the location of pipes he determined it was the toilet upstairs.

-What a fucking flop.

The room was warm and hot from the hot water heat. Ben cracked the French windows only to be greeted by the sounds of children playing in the courtyard.

-Yikes.

He closed the window and walked over to the bed. He pulled back the blanket and stared at the sheets. There were Bangkok brothels with cleaner sheets.

He threw the covers back, pulled one of the curtains off the window and lay down on the bed. He threw the pillows on the floor, rolled up his jacket for a pillow and lay down on top of the bed.

Sleep was elusive. His mind would not stop thinking of what he had to do and what had happened in the last forty-eight hours.

-Maybe a drink of water will help.

He got off the bed and went into the bathroom. There was a plastic glass in a glassine bag. On the bag it said in five languages ***Sanitized For Your Safety.***

Ben took the glass out of the glassine bag. The rim of the glass was covered in lipstick.

-Fuck this, shit, Ben shouted to the mirror.

He put on a clean pair of underwear, shirt and his jeans. Packed his backpack took the key and went to the lobby.

The Sketis look-alike was deep into the Furry Freak Brothers.

Ben threw the key on the counter and left the hotel.

-Food, he said to the quiet street.

To be continued.

