

Five Million Yen: Chapter 36

by Daniel Harris

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Ben left the Paris flop, turned left and headed up rue Chaligny to Boulevard Diderot. He knew there was a newsstand by the Metro stop and one of his favorite brasseries on the corner. He bought a copy of *Libération* and crossed over to the brasserie.

It was a little too chilly for sitting outside. The typical Parisian sprinkle was imminent. The patron, Claude, a devotee of jazz and new music, immediately recognized Ben.

-Ah, Clarone, you have not forgotten us, he said warmly.

-No, and you have not forgotten me either, said Clarone returning his greeting with a touch of irony.

-There was a big article about you giving a premiere in Monte Carlo of a new Hausenstockmann concerto in last weekend's *Le Monde*. I have a copy here somewhere. Perhaps you would be so kind as to autograph it for me.

-Absolutely, Claude. For you, it would be a pleasure.

-Please, Ben, let me give you a good table. You want to look out on Diderot or Chaligny?

-Diderot, if you would.

-How about this table, you can see both.

-Perfect, Claude. And how are your wife and daughter?

-They could not be better. Céline is expecting around Christmas and my wife, Sabine still makes your favorite food in the kitchen. My son-in-law tends the bar afternoons and evenings. Soon we will be a three-generation restaurant, he said proudly. And your wife, Zoë?

-I'm afraid Zoë and I have split up. But she is a big television star in America.

- Zoë is such a charming and beautiful woman. So sorry, Ben, said Claude, shaking his head.

-Thank you Claude. It was difficult with all my traveling and her instant stardom. Well, I am starved. But first...

-Yes, I know, you would like a pastis.

-Ah, you know my tastes, Claude.

-And then a four-egg omelet with brie, American pancakes with good French Canadian maple syrup, café express, double.

-This is why I call this my favorite Paris restaurant.

-Here is Annette, she will take care of your every wish, well almost, said Claude with a Gallic grin and twinkle in his eye.

Annette was a big-boned thirty-something woman with a Brittany accent. She brought Ben his pastis.

-Claude is so pleased you are here, she said to Ben.

-I've known him since I first came here about ten years ago. He is a fan of my music and a wonderful man. I always stop here when I'm in Paris.

-Tell me when you wish to eat. I will bring your meal. Did you want the omelet first and the crêpes later, or the other way around?

-Together, if that is possible.

-As you prefer.

Ben very carefully poured the water into the pastis. When it had turned a milky white, it was ready to drink. He took a sip and rolled it around in his mouth. He had put the correct amount of water in the glass. The licorice flavor was perfect. He cracked open *Libération* and searched for news about the bombing of Yolande's restaurant or the *Affair Corse*. He found nothing.

Claude came up to the table with a copy of the arts section of Sunday's *Le Monde*.

-Ben, if I may ask...

-Claude, do you have a ballpoint? I don't want to use a fountain pen or pencil. One will smear and the other fades away.

Claude walked back to the bar and returned with a Bic pen. Ben tested it on the paper place mat. It didn't work.

-Must be a Bic, laughed Claude. Their lighters work much better.

-Flick my Bic, said Ben. It is a slogan on American television for Bic lighters. Zoë was shown "flicking her Bic" and lighting a cigarette in one of their advertisements. The glow from the Bic lighter gave a mysterious *film noir* look. She received hundreds of fan letters.

-Flick my Bic. I like that, said Claude.

Claude went to the bar and returned with another pen. Ben tested it, but held it teasingly barely above the paper.

-I can't believe it, said Claude.

-I'm just messing with you, Claude. See, it works; he said pressing the pen on the paper.

-Well, flick my Bic, exclaimed Claude. Ben you are just an old trickster.

They both laughed at Claude's quick pick up on the innuendo of the ad slogan.

Ben wrote: *To my great friend and faithful fan, Claude AuSable, Ben Clarone.*

-I hope my French isn't too poor.

-It is just fine, Ben. Thank you so much.

-You can ask Annette to bring my breakfast when it is ready.

-One Ben Clarone special coming right up.

Ben ate with relish, but slowly enough to enjoy the quality of the meal. The meal was a treat. It tasted better than any breakfast he had eaten since the last time he had eaten there.

The restaurant was beginning to fill with lunch customers. Ben checked the bar clock: five minutes to noon.

-Time to look for Miguel Martine and his bouquiniste. Strange name for a green box stall selling used books, posters, post cards and other collectables, thought Ben.

Ben motioned to Annette that he wanted the bill. She disappeared behind the bar.

Claude came to his table.

-Ben, you don't think I'm going to charge you. You are a friend of the house and our family. You are my guest. I insist.

-Thank you, Claude. You are too kind. What metro do I take to Pont Neuf?

-Take the number 1, direction La Défense to Louvre-Rivoli.

-That sounds easy. Thank you so very much my good friend. I will be in Paris again soon and darken your door, but no more free meals. Deal?

-I will say yes, but you know I am lying.

-You are the best, my friend. They embraced and gave each other the traditional three-air kiss.

-*Merci bien et au revoir, mon ami*, said Ben shouldering his pack.

-*Ciao*, baby, answered Claude with a big smile on his face.

Ben crossed rue Chaligny and entered the Metro station. There were a lot of tourists with suitcases on the train since the next stop was Gare de Lyon. Ben stood all the way to Louvre-Rivoli. He exited the train, checked his bearings and turned down rue de l'Amiral-de-Coligny toward the Seine. He turned left on Quai de Louvre toward Pont Neuf. He noticed that not all the green boxes or bouquinistes were open. He hoped the first one was. He crossed the boulevard and started walking up river on the riverside. The first bouquiniste was closed. That was the one that was supposed to be open. It had to be at least quarter past noon. He decided to keep walking. He hoped that the owner, Miguel Martine, was late and it was not some trick of Dan Arris's. When he reached the third bouquiniste, he saw poster advertising a 1973 concert he gave in France. Could this be the correct green box? It was the first one open.

-Excuse me, how much is that poster of Ben Clarone?

-100 francs.

-Are you Miguel Martine?

-Who is asking?

-Ben Clarone. That's me on the poster.

-Sorry, no.

-I am holding it for a Benjamin Adoyan.

-Hey, that is me. Look here is my passport.

Ben unshouldered his pack and produced his Benjamin Adoyan passport.

-Here is proof.

-That's not how it works.

-Stop busting my balls. I will give you 100 francs for the poster.

Miguel walked away and started answering questions from a couple of English girls. Ben noticed he spoke perfect Thames Valley English. Ben had the feeling that this guy, Miguel, was going to be a difficult customer, but he had to play along, or he would not get his five thousand francs, or more importantly, his contrabass clarinet. He needed both. His funds were low and he had to have the contrabass for tonight's rehearsal with Hausenstockmann.

The English girls didn't buy anything and walked away.

-OK, said Ben, I'm a man on a tight time schedule. Will you sell me the poster of Ben Clarone's 1973 Paris concert for 100 francs, or not?

-Easy, big fella. I'm in control here. You are probably not up-to-date. Your business associate, Dan Arris, informs me that your contact in Marseille did not receive his portion of the 100-franc note. Since that is the case, I can't give you the poster, which will get you your money and whatever else you are expecting. I need that note to get my fee. No three-piece 100-franc note, no poster. You are, SOL, or shit-out-of-luck, Mr. Clarone, Mr. Adoyan, or whoever you are.

-*Au contraire*, Mr. Martine. I can give you a complete 100-franc note. Furthermore, I have a letter from the Marseille contact, which says I delivered the goods.

-Show me.

Ben produced the three parts of the 100-franc note and the letter from Yousef Al Sidran. Miguel put the three pieces together. They fit together perfectly.

-OK, Clarone. How did you pull this off?

-After I left Sidran's I went to the post office. I pleaded with them to please check Find Arts post office box one more time. There was

Arris's letter there with the missing third of the 100-franc note. I took the next night train to Paris.

-I think you are full of shit.

-Look what you are holding in your hand. Is it not a complete 100-franc note that had been cut into three parts?

Martine stepped into the sunlight and held up the three parts. He put the three parts of the note in his wallet along with the note from Sidran.

-I still think you are scamming me. But here's the poster. You will need it for the next part of your journey. Take this poster to the Hotel Ritz. Ask the receptionist for a package that Dan Arris left for you and an envelope. They should give them to you when you produce this poster. Then you will be on your way.

-Thank you. I like to talk to a man who likes to talk, said Ben quoting Mr. Gutman (Sidney Greenstreet) in *The Maltese Falcon*.

-Don't talk too much, or Arris will have you floating face down in the Seine.

-Look who's talking, replied Ben.

-One piece of advice. Not many of Arris's associates talk anymore. He thinks everyone is double-crossing him. You could be high on his list of expendables.

-Thanks, for the advice. I've got to keep moving.

-Nice doing business with you, Clarone. By the way, I enjoyed that concert in 1973.

Ben never turned back. He walked back to Rivoli. Ben didn't see any taxis, so he entered the metro at Louvre-Rivoli.

-I could be in a big squeeze. Arris must know that Yolande's was bombed and probably suspects I did not get that part of the 100-franc note. He already knows that Al Sidran didn't receive his part of the 100-franc note, yet I just gave Miguel Martine a complete 100-franc note, divided exactly as he had cut it. If Arris is as paranoid as Miguel says, I could be in serious trouble. Worse, if Miguel says I talked the post office into giving me mail from the Find Arts post office box, he'd know that is a lie, because he addressed the letter to the street address of Find Arts. I've got to get my

contrabass and money fast, before Arris returns from London. I'm sure he could make me disappear in a heartbeat. Worse, Arris being the smashmouth he is, he could hurt me so severely, I won't be able to play my instrument.

The train pulled into Concorde. Ben exited the station and walked up to Place Vendôme. The doorman at the Ritz looked at him as if he were *sans domicile*.

-I am here to pick up a package from one of your guests, Dan Arris, said Ben to the frowning doorman. They are expecting me in reception.

The doorman reluctantly let him pass. It was not the same doorman that had seen Ben and Claudia embracing in front of the hotel earlier that morning.

Before Ben could get to the reception desk, a uniformed hotel man approached him.

-May I assist you, sir?

-Yes, I am here to pick-up a package and an envelope that was left for me at reception by Dan Arris, one of your registered guests.

-Please come this way

The man took Ben into a private office. Another man in a cheap suit was sitting at an ornate desk. Pont

-May I see your passport? demanded the man.

Ben panicked momentarily. Which passport? He vaguely remembered Arris telling him that once he had his contrabass and the money, he would be Ben Clarone.

Ben reached into his pack and took out his Benjamin Adoyan passport. He put it on the desk and slid it towards the man.

-Excuse me, Mr. Adoyan. Please be seated.

Ben sat down on what was probably a few-thousand-dollar chair.

-You don't know me, but I am an associate of a friend of yours, Lt. Harold Smith. My name is Inspector Paumé. I am with INTERPOL. Do you understand?

He handed Ben his card.

-I think I know what INTERPOL is, but I'm not certain why you would be interested in me.

Paumé examined Ben's passport.

-This is very good. Excellent to be exact. Could only have been done by a master forger. Only the KGB has this kind of capability, or your own friend, Dan Arris. Where did you get this, Brooklyn, or from your friend Arris?

-The passport office in New York City

Paumé leaned back in his chair and studied Ben's face.

-This is not America. I can hold you in a cell for years, so let's be frank.

Who gave you this passport?

-A friend.

-That friend wouldn't be Dan Arris or Claudia Monchaud would it?

-Actually, I don't know the person. He gave it to me in a men's toilet at a bar.

-Don't try to be clever with me Mr. Adoyan. I am on to you.

-Look, I'm a musician. I don't do drugs. I am traveling to a gig. I gave my contrabass clarinet to Dan Arris to bring to Paris. It may need adjustments at the Selmer factory here in Paris. I have come to Paris to claim my instrument and perhaps have it repaired at the factory store on *rue de la Fontaine au Roi*, near *Republique*.

-So why did you fly to Nice?

-I had to meet the manager of the Monte Carlo Orchestra.

-Did you meet with him?

-No, I realized one of your incompetent agents was following me.

-Is that why you gave him the slip?

-Look, Inspector, I deal with a lot of sloppy musicians in my life. I have no truck with them, or anyone else who isn't, a pro, said Ben with some heat.

-Victor is one of our best operatives, replied Paumé.

-Well, Inspector, if that is your best, you are playing in a third-rate territory band.

It was like reading *Dick and Jane* to figure out what he was up to.

-You're pretty arrogant for a guy I could lock up for years.

-You're not going to do that. You need me, and so I'm asking you what do you want from me?

Ben leaned back in his chair.

-I don't need you. I have enough on Arris to lock *you* up for twenty years as an accomplice.

-You are like a bad B movie, Paumé. All I want is my contrabass and my money. The art shit is between you and Arris.

-Just what art shit are you talking about?

-The same crap that everyone around me has been talking about for the last week. Listen, I delivered a friend's paintings to Nice and Marseille so they could be sold. That is not a crime.

-Traveling under an assumed name and false passport *is* a crime.

-My passport was stolen. They provided me with a passport.

-OK, enough of this. Lt. Harold Smith told me you were an innocent. I'll take his word for it. He's the top guy in this business. But, keep your nose clean. We will be watching your every move. Any funny business and we take you in. In France it is the rule of Napoleon. You are guilty. You must prove yourself innocent.

-So, how do I get my instrument and my money?

-You'll have to talk to Arris. His wife, Claudia, took the package and the envelope up to their room.

-She did *what*?

-Love on a train is only transitory, my friend, said Palumé with a smug look of someone who knew more than he let on. Claudia is the legal spouse of Dan Arris.

-*What!* You're pulling my chain.

-No, I think you pulled the chain. Your money and instrument are down the tube as you Americans say.

-You're saying I've been had by a bunch of bandits?

-I deal with bandits all the time. You should work for *me*. It might be safer.

-Fuck you and the horse you came in on. I want, I mean *need* my horn.

-So go get it. You are free to call their room and go get what you want.

-You are one asshole.

-No sense in name-calling, said Paumé cooly. You are free to go. Reception will call them to announce your arrival. He then clasped his hands on the desk and gave Ben a smug smile.

Ben left the office and walked rather hesitantly toward the reception desk.

To be continued.

