

Five Million Yen: Chapter 37

by Daniel Harris

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Ben felt like he had been hit on the head. Claudia still married to Arris? Did Inspector Paumé know what he was talking about? Ben guessed that if Claudia could play-act a broken ankle, then feigning a divorce and her affection for Ben was a cakewalk. Ben's faded jeans stood out amongst the opulence of the Ritz. As befit the place, the lobby was filled with the rich and famous. It was obvious this was the roost of the elite. How did Arris afford such lodging? Enough musing, thought Ben. Time was ticking; he had to retrieve his money and contrabass clarinet.

Ben approached the reception desk.

-Yes, sir, may I assist you? asked one of the clerks.

-Yes, a Mr. Dan Arris left an envelope and a musical instrument case for me. I believe I am to give you this poster as proof of my identity.

-One moment, please. I will return immediately.

The clerk consulted with a white-haired man whose demeanor suggested rank and authority. Together they approached Ben.

-Yes, Mr...?

-Adoyan, Benjamin Adoyan.

-Mr. Adoyan, Mrs. Arris took the envelope. She had the case delivered to her suite.

-Hmm. How do I arrange with Mrs. Arris for a pick-up?

-You will have to speak with Mrs. Arris. We will call her room.

The clerk dialed the room. It rang for a long time. Finally Ben could hear Claudia's voice on the phone.

-A Mr. Adoyan would like to speak with you.

There was a long silence. Then Ben could hear her speaking.

-Mr. Adoyan, said the clerk, Mrs. Arris will meet you in her room in fifteen minutes. A bellman will escort you to her room at one-fifteen. You may wait in the reception area.

-Thank you. You have been most helpful.

Ben found an empty chair and sat with his backpack between his legs. He exhaled a deep breath. He was closing in on his goal.

Inspector Paumé entered the lobby.

-Ah, Mr. Adoyan, I am so glad you are still here. You left your passport.

-Thank you Inspector. I am waiting for Mrs. Arris.

-Yes, I would think so. Is there anything I can do for you? asked Paumé.

-Thank you. Actually, there is something you can do. Will you wait here until I return with my musical instrument? I don't trust Arris. He might decide to rough me up. He's already pulled a gun on me.

-There is no honor among thieves, Clarone. You are now discovering that.

-I'm not saying he *will* hurt me, but he never *liked* me. I wish I never met the man.

Inspector Paumé gave Ben a patronizing nod. He reached out and took the concert poster from Ben.

-Is that poster from one of your concerts? asked Paumé

-Yes. I always wanted a copy. I found this at a *bouquiniste*.

-*Bouquinistes* can be treasure troves. You have to dig to find the gems, said Paumé

-Luck helps.

-Exactly. Luck is when preparation meets opportunity, said Paumé. Are you lucky Ben Adoyan?

-I need to keep moving, snapped Ben. What's keeping Claudia?

-Ben, as a keen observer of the human condition, the more a woman wants a man, the longer she keeps him waiting, instructed Paumé.

-Touché

A bellman came up to them.

-Excuse me. Are you Mr. Adoyan?

-Yes sir, I am.

-I will escort you to Mrs. Arris's suite.

Ben stood up and hoisted his pack on one shoulder.

-I will take your pack, Mr. Adoyan.

-Of course. Bad habit of mine. Then to Paumé: see you soon
inspector.

-Keep your nose clean, advised Paumé *sotto voce*.

Ben followed the bellman to the elevator.

-Do you come often to Paris?

-Yes, sir, but I stay with friends. My purse is too thin for the Hotel
Ritz. Perhaps, some day.

Ben looked at the man. He was middle-aged and appeared very
fit.

-Have you worked here long?

-Yes, sir. Since 1952.

-I'm sure you've met many famous people working here.

-Yes, sir. It goes with the job.

They arrived on the floor where the Arris suite was located. Ben
followed the bellman down the hallway. The plush carpeting muted
their footsteps. The bellman held Ben's pack away from his body, as
if it were toxic.

The bellman pushed the buzzer.

-Yes, who is it? Asked a female voice.

-The bellman with Mr. Adoyan, madam.

-One moment.

Claudia opened the door. She was dressed in a dark Chanel suit
with a beautiful Hermès scarf gracing her neck. Her make-up was
perfection. She glowed.

-Ben, it's so good to see you! Please give this to the bellman.

Ben handed him two ten-franc coins and took his backpack.

-Thank you, said the bellman. When you are ready to leave,
please ring. Guests and visitors do not carry luggage at the Hotel
Ritz.

-I will, said Claudia. Ben, come in.

Ben entered the *Belle Époque*: ornate furniture, heavy drapery, thick carpeting, and tasteful paintings decorated the suite. His contrabass clarinet case was stored under a baby grand piano. Claudia closed the door, turned and put her arms around Ben.

-Ben, Ben, Ben. I had to see you again, that's why I had your clarinet brought up here.

-Well, you gave me a big scare. I thought something had gone wrong. A hundred possibilities were racing through my head.

-Come, show me you love me, said Claudia offering her lips to Ben.

-You look stunning, Claudia. So beautiful.

They embraced for a long time. Claudia's kisses were dissolving Ben's wariness.

-Claudia, I would love to stay and play, but I have to get to the airport, pay for my ticket and arrive in Nice in time for a rehearsal.

-We could have lunch up here. Dan won't arrive from London for at least another two hours.

-I really can't, Claudia, he said kissing her on the cheek and then nuzzling her neck. Wow, that is some perfume, he whispered in her ear. It goes right to my head.

-Are you sure you don't want some sport, Mr. Clarone? She put her hand on his pants and felt his enthusiasm.

-Don't Claudia. I really have to go.

-Ben, you are mean, she pouted. I hope you have blue balls all the way to Nice.

-Come on, Claudia. Play fair. You know I'm on a tight schedule.

-OK, be that way. But don't forget the adage about the fury of a woman scorned.

-I'll make it up to you. Do you have the envelope?

-I'm talking passion and you're talking money. Ben you are such a klutz. She playfully beat him on his chest.

Claudia walked across the room, lifted her purse from a Louis XVI side chair, and took out a fat envelope.

-Here it is, Mr. Spoilsport. Save some for when I visit you in Nice next week.

Ben opened the envelope and counted ten 1000-franc notes and twenty 500-franc notes. He put the money in his wallet. He had to fold the notes because they were too large for an American-size wallet. France was a country whose money was kind to the blind, all denominations were different sizes, coins and notes.

-Would you call for the bellman?

-Ben, you're just going to kiss and run? said Claudia, adopting her best seductive pose.

-Look, Claudia, you know how I feel about you, but my day has only just begun.

Claudia walked to the door and pushed a button.

-Yes, Mrs. Arris?

-I need a bellman. He will need a cart.

-Yes, Mrs. Arris

Claudia turned to Ben. She gave him a big smile.

-Ben, Dan Arris wanted me to keep you here until he arrived. He thinks you are scheming him. He says he mailed the part of the 100-franc note to Sidran a day after he mailed Yolande's part. Sidran telephoned him in London to tell him that you delivered the painting, but the part of the 100-franc note had not arrived. Sidran gave you a note embossed with the Find Arts company seal. He also knows that Yolande's restaurant was bombed, so you shouldn't have gotten that part of the note either. Since you arrived in Paris with the three parts of the 100-franc note, Arris is convinced that you and Gringovitch are conspiring against him. You, Ben Clarone, are in *big* trouble with Arris. Now you are also in *big* trouble with me. You owe me serious loving, Claudia said with more than a touch of bitch in her voice.

-So, whose side are you on? Arris's or mine? asked Ben.

-Yours, of course, replied Claudia. Would I have given you the money, if I were on Arris's side?

-I'm not out of here yet. How much did you tip the bellman to bring up my contrabass?

-100 francs.

Ben looked in his wallet. He was short of small bills.

-Claudia, can you change one of these 500-franc bills?

-No, but I'll swap one of your 1000-franc notes for a 100-franc note.

-You're showing some fury, Claudia. That's a steep exchange.

-Take it or leave it. You're getting out of here with what you wanted, so consider it a business expense, snapped Claudia.

-Yes, but not all I would have liked to have had, he replied with all the sexually suggestive innuendo he could muster. You have a terrible proud beauty when you're angry, but I prefer you warm and affectionate.

Ben took a thousand-franc note from his wallet and gave it to Claudia. She handed him five 20-franc notes.

-Don't you have a single 100-franc bill?

-Yes, but I am delighted to see you a little humiliated. Those crumpled 20-franc notes make you out to be the cheap chump you really are, snapped Claudia.

-Cheap? Claudia, be fair, pleaded Ben. I just gave you a thousand francs for a hundred francs.

Claudia looked at Ben, tears welling up in her eyes. Ben, don't be mad. Here's your thousand-franc note. But you better leave quickly. Arris could return early and he could be out for blood.

-Will he physically hurt *you*?

-I don't think so. I can handle him. I'm worried about you. He will work you over, especially if he's been drinking. He could break your fingers, or knock out your teeth.

The bellman rang the door buzzer.

-Bellman, said the man.

Claudia opened the door. This big case, please, she directed him.

-And this backpack, added Ben.

Ben helped the doorman move the case from under the piano. It felt like the correct weight and had the customs seals across the latches.

-Please be careful. This is a very fragile and rare musical instrument.

-Yes, sir, but of course.

Ben turned and gave Claudia a big bear hug with a long deep passionate kiss.

-Not in front of the bellman, Ben, whispered Claudia, squeezing his hand and giving him a soft kiss on the lips with a light flick of her tongue.

-Mmmm, said Ben. Remember, Villa Arson, my home for the next three weeks. Isabella has the phone number. Call me later tonight, around midnight, he said gently holding her shoulders with both hands. He softly hummed the beginning of Thelonious Monk's *'Round Midnight* into her ear, then turned to leave.

Ben followed the doorman down the hallway. He looked over his shoulder. Claudia was wiping her eyes. She blew him a kiss, turned and entered her suite, shoulders slightly heaving.

-I will need a taxi to Orly-Ouest, said Ben to the bellman.

-Yes, sir. The doorman will get one for you.

-Yes, I forgot, said Ben embarrassed by his gaffe.

-I will never know how to live like the rich, he chided himself.

They left the elevator and Ben looked for Inspector Paumé. He was standing, talking to two chic women. Ben walked over to them.

-Inspector, thank you for waiting, Ben said in English.

-Ben, it was my pleasure. May I introduce Mrs. Beverly Krackenthorpe and her daughter Olivia. Beverly's husband, Jack, is head of MI-5.

-Jesus, thought Ben. Now what?

-Pleased to meet you, said Ben making a slight bow.

-Ben Clarone is a respected musician from New York City who will be premiering a new concerto in Monte Carlo next month.

-Are you the same Clarone who leads *Pieces of Eight*? asked Mrs. Krackenthorpe.

-I'm your man, said Ben with flair.

-Well, Olivia and I heard you last year in London. It's not music to my taste, but your band is filled with virtuoso performers. Olivia loves your music. Don't you, Olivia?

Olivia could not take her eyes off Ben. She gave him a warm smile.

-Always a pleasure to meet a fan, said Ben, giving Olivia a grin and a wink.

There was nothing remarkable about Olivia, yet everything was remarkable. She hadn't said a word. She was definitely from a different class than Ben. Unlike most English women, both the mother and the daughter had trim ankles. Ben liked a good pair of stems.

-I must be going. The bellman is waiting. It has been a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Krackenthorpe and Olivia. You should hear my concert in Monte Carlo in three weeks. I can have artist comp tickets waiting for you.

-Thank you Mr. Clarone. I doubt I will be able to attend, perhaps Olivia. Thank you for the offer.

-Excuse us, ladies, I need a word with Mr. Clarone, interrupted Inspector Paumé.

The two men walked off a short distance. Ben bent his head letting the shorter Paumé whisper in his ear. Paumé handed Ben a handkerchief.

-Wipe the lipstick off your mouth. Lieutenant Smith is correct. You are an ingénue, scolded Paumé. Don't look now, Dan Arris just walked through the front door.

-I owe you one, said Ben wiping his mouth.

Arris walked up to Ben. Arris did not look happy.

-I see you found your instrument. I hope there was no trouble, snarled Arris.

-Oh, no. It all went as planned. I can't thank you enough for taking my contrabass to Paris for me, replied Ben innocently.

-You have my marker, Clarone, warned Arris.

-Well, gentlemen, I'd love to stay and chat, said Ben shaking the hand of Paumé and Arris, but I have a plane to catch.

Ben walked across the lobby and out the entrance. He handed the waiting bellman the five 20-franc notes.

-Thank you, sir. Have a good voyage and concert.

-I need a taxi for Orly-Ouest, Ben said to the doorman.

Ben supervised the loading of his contrabass into the awkwardly designed trunk of the Citroën. There was no room for his backpack, so he sat with it in the back seat.

-Orly-Ouest, please.

Before the taxi could pull away, Arris opened the rear door and jumped in next to Ben

-Ben, I'll take a ride down to Rivoli with you, said Arris closing the door.

-What the....

As soon as the Ritz was behind them, Arris turned to Ben and gave him a hard punch to the abdomen. Ben doubled up.

Arris punched him a second time in the ribs.

-Stop, you crazy bastard. What's got into you, Arris?

-You know what, you double-crossing dago greaseball.

-Gentlemen, gentlemen. Please no fighting in my taxi.

-Stop here, growled Arris.

Arris opened the door, exited the car, turned around and leaning in, gave Ben a knuckle-cracking fist to the eye.

-And that's for fucking my wife, shouted Arris slamming the car door.

-Are you injured? asked the driver.

-Please, just take me to the airport. He is a madman.

During the trip to Orly-Ouest, the driver checked Ben in the rear-view mirror. Ben was hurt, but not as badly as he could have been if Arris had caught him with Claudia in the hotel.

When they arrived at the terminal, Ben asked the driver how he looked.

-You will have a very bad black eye. You must put some ice on it.

-In America, they recommend a raw steak, Ben said with humor.

-The same here, but I think ice is better. My father was a hand-to-hand fighting instructor in the Foreign Legion. He always recommended ice.

They pulled up to the departure area. Ben helped the driver with the contrabass. Ben was in a hurt. He could hardly see out of his right eye.

-I will need a luggage trolley. The man hurt my ribs. It is too painful to carry this case.

The driver gave a piercing whistle. A porter appeared with a luggage trolley.

-How much do I owe you? Ben asked the taxi driver.

-250 francs.

-Take 350 out of this, said Ben giving the driver one of the five hundred franc notes.

-Thank you. Are you sure you will be able to travel? You don't look well.

-I'm an old hand at this. Thank you for your concern. You are a good man.

The 3:15 flight was late. Ben had to pay extra for the contrabass. He didn't want it to travel in the luggage compartment, so he bought a half-fare child's seat.

He was sitting in the waiting area when two gendarmes came up to him.

-Excuse us, sir. May we see your passport and ticket?

Ben reached in his jacket pocket. He had bought the tickets using the name Ben Clarone, but his Ben Clarone passport did not have a French entry stamp. He could be in trouble.

The taller of the two gendarmes looked at the tickets and his passport photo.

-Why do you have two tickets? inquired the taller gendarme.

-One is a child's ticket for my musical instrument. It is very fragile. One of those hidden expenses musician's have.

-What happened to your eye? The shorter of the two asked.

-A jealous boyfriend. I thought this could only happen in Italy, not a sophisticated country like France, palavered Ben.

The two gendarmes nodded in agreement.

-We should take you to the medical station. Your flight will be at least an hour late. It always is. The British can never keep a schedule at Heathrow.

-What about my instrument?

-Bring it with you. We will watch it while they examine you.

Ben started to rise and there was a sharp pain. He almost blacked out. The two gendarmes grabbed him and sat him down again.

The tall one called for a wheelchair on his radio. They helped him into the wheelchair. The airport porter pushed Ben, while the taller gendarme pushed the trolley with the contrabass.

At the medical office, a nurse put an ice pack on Ben's injured eye and examined his chest and abdomen.

-You are very lucky, said a matronly nurse. Had you been hit higher that blow would have caused serious internal injuries. Your ribs will be sore for a week or more. It will hurt to cough or sneeze.

-I have a music rehearsal tonight in Nice. Will I be able to play?

-I can give you some medicine for the pain, but you must not drive when you take it. You will be legally drunk.

-I will take it before bed.

-That would be best. What a big musical instrument. It must take a lot of air.

-Yes.

-Here is a small tube of arnica pellets. You hold it upside down and twist until four or five pellets fall in the top. Put them under your tongue to dissolve. It will prevent swelling and ease the pain.

-I know *arnica montana*. It is the best for bruises or soreness.

Ben sat in the dispensary.

-Let me see if I can stand and walk, said Ben to the nurse..

-Wait, said the nurse. She went into the outer room and asked the two gendarmes to come into the dispensary, to assist if necessary.

Ben slowly rose to his feet and took a few steps. He was going to make it. Once he was standing he was OK. It was the transition from sitting to standing that was difficult.

-I think you should use the wheelchair, said the tall gendarme. There are so many old people flying to Nice, the porters are experts with wheelchairs.

Ben gladly took them up on the suggestion. The two gendarmes radioed for another porter and left. The two porters pushed Ben and his contrabass to the waiting room. They were making the first call for his flight.

The two porters wheeled Ben and his contrabass onto the plane, seating him in the first row with his contrabass snugly cinched into the window seat.

-Nice. Monte Carlo. Here I come, said Ben to himself with a huge sigh of relief, but will I be able to play tonight?

* * *

Dan Arris rode the elevator up to his floor.

-Not only did the deal in London fall through because the Krauts couldn't ship the painting out of West Berlin, he said to himself, but also I nearly broke my hand on that guinea musician's stone head.

He entered the suite. Claudia was dressed in a Chanel suit and was talking on the telephone. It sounded work related.

Arris went into the bedroom undressed and took a shower. He put on some casual clothes and went into the living room of the suite. Claudia was sitting drinking a whiskey. He poured himself three fingers of scotch.

-Dan, how did the meeting in London go? asked Claudia, hanging up the phone.

-Claudia, it was a bust. A damn waste of time and money. Those Krauts failed to come through for a second time, he said angrily.

-You must be very disappointed, she replied in a soothing voice.

Arris paced around the room. Claudia watched him warily.

-What happened with Clarone? I saw him in the lobby with his clarinet. I thought you were to keep him here until I arrived. You've let me down! he barked.

-My period started, so I couldn't get him into bed. You know how fussy Italians are about those inconveniences.

Arris continued to walk in circles around the room. He stopped at the piano, slammed his hand on the keys producing a dissonant Bartók-like tone cluster. Claudia winced. Arris abruptly turned to Claudia.

-Take a shower, Claudia, he ordered.

-Why? I took one before I dressed. I thought we were having a late lunch downstairs.

-Take another one. I don't want the smell of that dago bastard on you.

-There's no man smell on me, she protested.

-Do as I say, commanded Arris.

Claudia reluctantly picked up her drink and went into the bedroom. She took her time undressing, carefully hanging up her suit, blouse and scarf. She had no interest in any of Arris's bondage games, a favorite sport of his when she had her period.

She turned the shower on full hot. The bathroom and part of the bedroom filled with steam. She donned a shower cap and drained her drink, putting the glass on the vanity. She tested the water with an outstretched foot, adding some cold water.

Stepping into the shower she realized how much she loved to stand in the gushing hot water. Being a stewardess, it was difficult to bathe as often as she preferred. Perfumes were her best friends.

Arris came into the bedroom. He saw Claudia in the shower. He undressed and crept into the bathroom. Claudia was an impressionist blur in the steamy shower. The shower was so big, there was no curtain. He could see she was facing the shower head and letting the water run off her breasts. Arris came up behind Claudia grabbing her hair. He snapped her backward onto the floor of the shower.

Falling backward, Claudia's head hit the marble soap dish. She lay sprawled on the floor. Blood oozed from her right ear, her mouth and her right eye. She mouthed the words "You bastard", but no sound came out. The light went out of her eyes. Arris glared at the cold stare of those dead eyes.

-Serves you right, you double agent bitch, spat Arris.

The shower cap floated toward the drain, bumping against Claudia's inert body.

Arris carefully left the bathroom. Using the towel he had used earlier, he dried off and put on his casual clothes.

He mentally rehearsed what he would say on the telephone. He said it aloud several times, perfecting his delivery like an actor rehearsing his lines.

He picked up the telephone.

-Yes, Mr. Arris, how may I assist you? an officious voice asked.

-Please, help! There has been a terrible accident. My wife has fallen in the shower and is unconscious. Please send a doctor. Hurry. For the mercy of God, please hurry.

-Unlock your door. Someone will be there immediately. The hotel operator called the house detective, the house doctor and their contracted ambulance service.

It was a good five minutes before the doctor and the house detective arrived. The water in the shower was still running. The shower basin was half-full of water. The blood from Claudia's wounds colored the water a surreal sepia.

-In the shower. Hurry! Arris shouted in a distraught voice.

The house detective entered the bathroom. He glanced at Claudia's body, reached in and turned off the water. The doctor felt her neck for a pulse. He shook his head.

The house detective walked into the living room. Ignoring Arris, he picked up the phone and asked for an outside line. He dialed the local police.

-This is Didier at the Hotel Ritz. There has been a fatal accident. Please send the forensic team.

Didier hung up the telephone.

-No one leaves this room until the police give you the authority. Mr. Arris, I am sorry to report that your wife has passed this life.

-No!

-I'm afraid so, Mr. Arris. You will please stay here. Do not go into the bathroom. The police will be here shortly. I'm sure they have questions for you. I further suggest that until the police authorize

you, you are to speak to no one. The reputation of the hotel must be preserved. The detective spoke in the calm emotionless voice of long-time authority.

-Fuck your stinking hotel. What about my wife? shouted Arris.

-There is nothing that can be done for her. I am very sorry. She was a beautiful woman, well liked by the staff. Mrs. Arris is dead. The coroner will release the body to you when he has finished his investigation. You may want to engage an attorney.

To be continued.

