

Five Million Yen: Chapter 41

by Daniel Harris

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Ben sat in the restaurant waiting for Gabe Benjamin to return from his phone calls.

-Would you care for a dessert, monsieur? the waiter asked.

-What do you recommend?

-*Mousse chocolat*. The chef makes it with special Belgium chocolate and tops it with whipped cream and his own chocolate liqueur.

-You've sold me. Please also give me a double café express.

-You will be pleased with your choices.

The restaurant was small with six tables inside and four outside. Ben always wondered how these small establishments could survive. A small place like this in New York City would be out of business in a month. Ben calculated the price of his meal at around 120 francs or about \$24 including wine. A mid-level good restaurant in New York would have to charge at least \$60 for the same meal and more for the wine.

The waiter made a big show of the dessert, displaying it to several curious patrons, before placing it in front of Ben with an elegant twist of his wrist. The serving-sized spoon the waiter provided made the mousse appear smaller than it actually was. Ben sampled the mousse.

-Wow! This is amazing, Ben said to the smiling waiter. My compliments to the chef.

-I will monsieur, said the waiter beaming. Are you the American musician, Ben Clarone, who is performing with the Monte Carlo orchestra in two weeks?

-Yes, sir. How do you know?

-My son plays the saxophone and his teacher told him you were the replacement soloist after Arno Donax was injured in the road accident. Your picture was in the arts section of *Nice-Matin* yesterday.

-Without this black eye, I hope.

-Yes, it is a fine photo taken at Grand Parade du jazz. I have a copy of the paper.

-I would like to see it, said Ben.

Ben took a sip of coffee. It was excellent as only a good establishment with the best machine and fine coffees could make. He savored the mousse slowly. The coffee and the mousse purged the bitterness of the morning's fight with Hausenstockmann.

The waiter returned with a well-worn copy of *Nice-Matin* opened to the page with Ben's photo. It was a photo of Ben in the full heat of improvising with his octet, *Pieces of Eight*. The telephoto lens made the drummer's ride cymbal appear to hover over his left ear.

-Good photo, said Ben.

-May I ask you a favor, Monsieur Clarone?

-Certainly. Would you autograph this photo for my son?

-Absolutely. What is his name?

-Nikki. The waiter spelled it for Ben. My wife is Russian.

Ben signed under the photo and added a note instructing Nikki to practice diligently and to come play for him.

-Oh, Nikki will be so happy. He is sixteen and has been studying since he was nine. He wants to go to the Conservatoire. He owns all your recordings.

-Who does he study with now?

-He is a student of Carmine Scornavacco who is a neighbor.

-He should study with Arno Donax. Have Nikki play for me. If he has progressed enough, I will write a recommendation for him to

study with Arno. I am staying at Villa Arson. Call me there and I will arrange a time to audition Nikki.

-You are very kind, Monsieur Clarone.

-Call me Ben.

-Thank you, Monsieur Clarone.

Gabe Benjamin walked up to the table.

-Ah, I see you left some *mousse chocolat* for me.

-No way, Gabe. Order your own.

-You're one stingy guy, Ben. Garçon, bring me a *mousse chocolat* and a *café américain*.

-Yes, monsieur, replied the waiter.

-So, Gabe, were you successful with the phone calls?

-Ben, you are in luck. Jean-Claude was terrified that you would bail on the gig. I told him I would make sure you were there at three sharp this afternoon.

-Did you have to promise him the film music recording?

-No way! I could almost hear the vise squeezing his balls when he answered the phone. Whatever you did or said put the fear of god in that Kraut and Jean-Claude.

-And a costume for tonight?

-As soon as I finish dessert, we meet Roi-de-Quoi in his Aspremont studio. You drive.

The waiter brought Gabe's dessert with the same flourish he used with Ben.

-You are in good luck, monsieur. After Monsieur Clarone ordered the *mousse chocolat*, everyone in the restaurant wanted *mousse chocolat*. This is the last serving.

Gabe took the huge spoon and loaded it with half of his mousse. He nibbled a bite off the spoon. A big smile, amplified by Gabe's large head, filled his face and brightened the whole room.

-Wow, said Gabe, this is unbelievably amazing. What do you say, Ben?

-Awesome, as they say in California, replied Ben.

-Well, this is to die for as we say in Brooklyn. Bravo, to the *pâtisserie*.

-Thank you, monsieur. I will tell him.

Ben watched Gabe savor each small bite of the mousse.

-You should have ordered the café express. It is excellent, said Ben.

-My stomach can't take strong coffee anymore.

A small thin man wearing a chef's toque approached the table.

-Gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed your meal at our modest restaurant.

-This is the owner and chef of the restaurant, explained the waiter. He would like to invite you to share a small glass of his homemade *grappa*.

-I'm Gabe Benjamin, a film producer, and this is the world famous musician, Ben Clarone. He is performing with the Orchestra of Monte Carlo, said Gabe.

-Yes, Louie has told me, said the chef. Louie, ordered the chef, bring another chair and three glasses, please.

-Yes, patron.

The waiter brought three liqueur glasses and an unmarked wine bottle. He poured a generous shot in each glass.

-Cin-cin, said the chef raising his glass.

-Cin-cin! To fine food, good films and great music, toasted Gabe.

-To friendship, said Ben.

The three men touched their glasses together.

It was not the taste Ben expected. This *grappa* was smooth and rested easy on the tongue as it sublimated in the mouth.

-This is *grappa*? asked Ben. It is so smooth. I have never had *grappa* of this quality.

-I make it myself. It is a labor of love. My family has been making our own *grappa* for generations.

-This is special, said Gabe. Thank you for giving us a taste.

-You both are welcome. If you want to have a private party, we can seat thirty persons. We will make a meal your guests will remember for years.

-Louie, give them our card.

Ben read the card: *L'Etoile*.

-Good name, said Ben.

-Yes, my wife's name is Estelle. The restaurant is named after her, explained the chef. Estelle is star and so is *L'Etoile*, both mean the star.

-I am sad to say it, but I have to go to a rehearsal, said Ben.

Louie, *la facture, s'il vous plait*.

-I've got this Ben, said Gabe.

-No, I owe you, replied Ben.

-If you insist. But the next dinner is on me.

After many handshakes, Gabe and Ben left the restaurant.

-We will have to boogie, if I'm to make it to the rehearsal. It is already after one.

-We'll make it, said Gabe.

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They arrived at Roi-de-Quoi's Aspremont studio before two. Pascal was waiting for them.

-Pascal, Ben and I just had the most amazing *mousse chocolat* and *grappa*, said Gabe.

-Let me guess. You ate at *L'Etoile* in the old city.

-You guessed it, said Ben. What kind of costume do you have for me?

-The perfect one for a horny guy like you, Ben. How about Papageno, the bird catcher's costume from Mozart's *Magic Flute*?

-Show it to me. Will it fit?

Pascal took the costume and held it against Ben. He accidentally touched Ben's sore ribs.

-Ouch! You hit my sore ribs, said Ben.

-Sorry, my friend. I will be more careful. You have to strip to your underwear so we can try it on.

Ben stripped down to his underwear. Pascal and Gabe helped Ben into the costume.

-It's too big, said Ben.

-I can fix that Ben, said Pascal. But here are the rest of your props. There was a birdcage, panpipes and a net on a handle.

-I love it, said Gabe. Ben, you look great.

-What do I do with all these props when I want to drink or dance?

-There is a loop for the net, a pocket for the pan-pipes and a hook and brace for the birdcage. I'll show you.

-But what about my face? Shouldn't I have a mask?

-Here is the *Pièce de résistance*. Pascal placed a colorful bird's head mask over Ben's head.

-Be gentle, my black eye is still sensitive, cautioned Ben.

-Now that is amazing, said Gabe. What do you think Pascal? Fits him perfectly.

Pascal found a full-length mirror on a rolling stand and put it before Ben.

-So, Ben, what do you think?

-*Perfecto*. Mozart would love it.

-It will take me an hour to alter the fit. I have to meet my children for the parade at five. Where do I leave it for you?

-Why don't I stay here, offered Gabe. When Pascal is finished he can drop me at my hotel, and Ben you can pick up the costume there.

-Sounds like a plan, said Ben. I have no idea how long that Kraut will keep me. We could be rehearsing until very late. I'll call you when I'm finished with the rehearsal?

-Okay, I'll wait for you, said Gabe.

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Ben pulled into Jean-Claude's driveway at ten minutes to three. He went to the front door and rang the bell. Jean-Claude answered and ushered him into the room where Nobokolov and Hausenstockmann were smoking and talking in German.

-Not a moment too soon, Herr Clarone, said Hausenstockmann in English.

-Never missed a downbeat in my life, replied Ben.

Ben unpacked his contrabass.

-I'm ready, said Ben.

-Don't you want to warm up, asked Nobokolov in his deep Russian *basso*.

-No free notes, replied Ben.

-Herr Clarone, I would like you to stand over here and Serge will stand facing you. Both of you will angle toward the audience. You will notice that I have directions in the part for how you are to change your angle to the audience. We will not rehearse that today, but when we are in the concert hall you will have to practice those movements. They are critical.

Ben looked at his part. It was not the part from last night, nor the part from this morning. It was a professionally copied part in French notation. Ben saw penciled fingerings scattered about the first page. This must be the part Cassandra Stefani used. Many of the marking were useless to Ben because he played a French system contrabass clarinet and Stefani used a German system bass clarinet. Almost, but not quite the same fingering system, beside the fact that the bass clarinet sounded an octave higher and required much less strength to play.

-We shall we begin with *Constellation I*, said Hausenstockmann. Herr Clarone, would you give Herr Nobokolov an A for tuning?

Ben played a concert a, a b-natural on his instrument.

-Does that seem sharp to you, Herr Nobokolov?

-No, it matches my A perfectly, said Nobokolov playing the A octave harmonic with Ben.

Ben could see that Hausenstockmann was looking for something to humiliate him.

-Very well then.

-I shall begin conducting from the beginning, said Hausenstockmann.

They played the first *Constellation* through without comment from Hausenstockmann.

-Herr Clarone, you are maybe a little too loud for the string bass.

-Yes, maestro, this can be a powerful instrument in the right hands.

-I can give a little more, said Nobokolov. Shall we read it through again?

The door to the room opened and a woman about thirty entered. She was slim and had a good figure. She moved with the grace of a dancer.

-Gentlemen, this is my assistant and the virtuoso clarinetist, Cassandra Stefani. Cassandra you know Serge Nobokolov. I don't think you've met Herr Ben Clarone from New York City.

-Please to meet you again, Cassandra, said Ben.

-Likewise, Ben. Hans, she said, Ben and I played together in Darmstadt the year I met you.

-Ah, you are old friends?

-Something like that, said Ben.

Cassandra, or Cass as she was known back in the states, was the epitome of the woman who would do anything to get her way. She wrapped herself around the conductor in Darmstadt and took an important solo opportunity away from Ben.

There was a deep silence.

-Shall we play the first *Constellation* again, asked Serge.

-Yes, yes, said Hausenstockmann.

This time through Ben pulled back a little and Serge gave a little more. Ben's playing gave Serge confidence. Where Serge was technically uncertain he could hide under Ben's big sound.

-Bravo, said Cassandra. Ben, that is the most amazing sound. I didn't know they made a wooden contrabass clarinet. Hans, no wonder you wanted Ben to play the part.

-Yes, he has played one of my compositions before. I wanted him for this, but it was not possible. Yet here he is, said Hausenstockmann.

Cassandra stared at the floor as if seeking moral guidance.

-Herr Clarone, may I call you Ben? asked Hausenstockmann.

-Yes, maestro, if I can call you Hans.

-Ben and Hans it is, said Hausenstockmann.

-You both can call me Serge, said Nobokolov.

-And all of you can call me Cass, added Stefani.

Ben smirked to himself in relief that all the power play silliness was finished for the moment.

The remainder of the rehearsal went smoothly. Animus fell away as the astonishing virtuosity of the performers and the craft of the composition became apparent.

-Can we take a break, asked Serge. I need a smoke.

-Yes, yes of course, said Hans.

-Hans, may I suggest some changes for clarity?

-Certainly Ben. There are some things I meant to change after last night's session.

Ben pointed out some places where some non-standard techniques would facilitate the performance and enhance the sound. Hans agreed to most of the changes and congratulated Ben on his quick read of the musical ethos of the composition.

The next two hours were spent fine-tuning the balances and tone colors between the two soloists. Serge was still having trouble with some of the passages, but being in Ben's presence gave him confidence and a sense of the proper performance style.

When they stopped for the evening it was after seven.

-I have a very nice bottle of wine. Perhaps we can all share it, asked Hans.

-Works for me, said Ben.

-I prefer a beer said Serge, but I will raise a glass with all of you.

Hans left the room to ask Jean-Claude for glasses.

-That is the most astonishing sound and technique you have, Ben, said Cass. I can hardly believe you are sight-reading that part. I worked on it for six months on a bass clarinet. You are reading it off as if you've played it all your life, and the contrabass is a much more difficult instrument.

-Thank you, Cass. It is a great piece. I knew it when I read through some early sketches last night. I think Hans has composed a winner.

-Ben and Serge do you know that Hans has engaged Salvatore Anello to make some films that will be projected during the performance? Hans and I saw some early versions and

Constellations will be the talk of the musical world. Salvatore will be coming to the rehearsal Tuesday. I'm sure he will be amazed at the sound you two produce.

-Salvatore Anello? asked Ben. His space films are my favorites. Grand galactic vistas and visionary protagonists fighting reactionary politicians are his métier. I love Anello's films.

Hans returned with Jean-Claude, the glasses and two bottles of wine. The wine was poured.

-To *Constellations*, proposed Ben.

-Thank you Ben, and a toast to Ben and Serge for their superb virtuosity. Thank you both, said Hausenstockmann.

To be continued

