

Five Million Yen: Chapter 42

by Daniel Harris

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Inspector Lilly Rose ordered the gendarme to pull the car into Jean-Claude's driveway.

-Should we go in? asked the gendarme.

-No, it is better to wait until he comes outside.

The gendarme parked the police vehicle so that it blocked Ben's Fiat from exiting the driveway.

Ben came out of the house favoring his left side. He noticed the police car blocking his car's path. The gendarme walked up to him and asked him to come to the police car.

-Passport, monsieur, *s'il vous plait*.

Ben gave the officer his Ben Clarone passport.

Seat yourself in the rear seat, said officer after he had frisked Ben.

-What do you want with me? Ben asked.

The officer didn't answer because he didn't know. He opened the rear door and motioned for Ben to enter.

-Mr. Clarone, do you have the keys to your automobile? asked Inspector Lilly Rose who was sitting in the rear seat.

-Yes.

-Give them to me, so the officer can put your instrument in your automobile.

-Ben gave her his keys.

The officer put the contrabass clarinet and music in Ben's rental Fiat. He returned and gave the keys to Lilly Rose. She put the keys in her purse.

-I am Inspector Lilly Rose, *Centrale Police Judiciaire*. Shall we speak in English, or are you comfortable in French?

Ben thought he might have an advantage if they spoke English.

-I would prefer English, replied Ben.

-Monsieur Clarone, how do you know this man, Dan Arris?

-I'll need my keys, said Ben.

Lilly Rose ignored Ben.

-In what capacity do you know Dan Arris? demanded Inspector Rose.

-He is a friend of a friend of mine.

-Why would a friend beat you? The police at Orly airport say someone savagely beat you. We suspect Dan Arris.

Ben was confused. How could he go from musical hero to suspect in less than two minutes?

-There was a misunderstanding. It concerned Dan Arris's wife, Claudia Monschaud.

-What kind of misunderstanding, Monsieur Clarone?

-Claudia is a Pan Am stewardess, said Ben. We first met on a flight to London about six months ago. At that time she told me she was divorced from her husband. I didn't see her for six months and only met her again on the flight to Nice last Thursday. We had a little fling on the train to Paris. I had to go to Paris to retrieve my contrabass clarinet from Dan Arris who brought it to Paris for me.

-Why did he do that?

-I delivered some paintings to Nice for him. He apparently didn't trust me, so he took my contrabass to Paris. I took the receipts for the pictures to his hotel in Paris Saturday afternoon. He wasn't there, but Claudia gave me my contrabass.

Ben did not mention the 20,000 francs.

-When was that?

-Around two o'clock Friday afternoon.

-Were you having an affair with Claudia Monschaud, also known as Madame Arris?

Ben didn't know what to say. Was having sex with an almost strange woman on a train an affair?

-We had sex, but hadn't established a strong relationship. We liked each other as more than friends, but I was worried that Claudia was acting as a honey trap and spying on me for Dan Arris.

-A bellman at the Ritz said you and she exchanged passionate embraces.

-Yes, we probably did. Claudia is a very desirable woman.

Ben looked at Inspector Lilly Rose. She was short, squat and hairy in all the wrong places. Her skirt barely contained her thighs. The left side of her nose and chin were home to two large warts. The wart on her chin sported a long lone black hair. Ben never saw a more unattractive woman.

-Monsieur Clarone, where are you staying while you are performing with the Monte Carlo Orchestra?

-At Villa Arson in Nice.

-How long have you been there?

-Only one night. I am supposed to attend their masquerade party as we speak.

-A few more questions and you may leave.

Ben spirits improved hearing that.

-Have you been in contact with Claudia Monschaud, Madame Arris since you left the Ritz yesterday afternoon?

-No. She said she would telephone me after midnight Friday, but I have no telephone in my studio at Villa Arson. There is no one at reception after midnight.

-Do you know where Claudia Monschaud is at this time?

-No. I assume she is either at the Ritz, or working at Pan Am.

-Claudia fell in the shower at the Ritz shortly after you visited her, hit her head and died soon thereafter.

-Are you sure?

-Yes, her body is in the morgue at this moment.

-Does that surprise you to hear that, Monsieur Clarone?

-Yes. I don't know what to think. We were planning to be together for a few days here in Nice. She has a friend who lives in Nice.

-A friend, Monsieur Clarone? Is that friend you?

-No, an art dealer, Isabella Sanitizzare. She lives in the old quarter.

-How well do you know Isabella Sanitizzare?

-Hardly at all. She drove me from the airport with Claudia when I arrived Thursday from JFK.

Inspector Rose was taking notes in a steno book. She had reached the last page and turned the book over.

-How was Claudia dressed when you last saw her?

-In an expensive Chanel suit, said Ben, and was fully made up to go out. She looked stunning. She and Arris were hosting high rollers for an art auction at the Ritz later in the afternoon and evening.

-Why would she be taking a shower?

-I'll ask the questions, Monsieur Clarone.

Inspector Rose gave Ben a disapproving glare. She looked directly into Ben's eyes.

-Monsieur Clarone, did you use a *préservatif* [condom] when you had sex with Madame Arris?

Ben could not believe this woman asked that question

-No. Claudia said it was nearly time for her roses.

-What kind of sex did you have: vaginal, anal or both?

Ben couldn't believe this pig asking such a question

-Vaginal, said Ben. Why would you ask such a personal question?

-The medical examiner found semen in her vagina, replied Rose.

-Do you know if her roses started when she was with you?

-Yes, she said they did. She said sometimes sex could bring them on.

-Did you have sex with Claudia at the Ritz?

-No, said Ben. I was at the Ritz only long enough to retrieve my contrabass clarinet. Perhaps fifteen, twenty minutes total. I was alone with Claudia for perhaps ten minutes maximum. The bellman was there most of the time.

-Did you talk to anyone other than the staff and Madame Arris at the Ritz?

-Inspector Paumé from INTERPOL, said Ben.

Inspector Rose blanched. Her head snapped around and she gave Ben a sharp look. She looked shaken.

-Why were you talking to Inspector Paumé?

-He asked to see me. He interviewed me in an office at the Ritz.

-What did he ask you?

-Questions about Dan Arris and the paintings I took to Nice.

There was a long silence.

-I also asked him to watch my back. I was afraid Dan Arris would want to hurt me because I had sex with Claudia. Arris never liked me, once in Brooklyn he pulled a gun on me.

-Do you know Lieutenant Harold Smith of the New York City police department?

-Yes. I was involved in an incident at a hotel in New York City. Lieutenant Smith was the investigating detective.

-What was the incident?

It was getting hot in the car and Inspector Lilly Rose did not smell very good. To Ben it seemed like Inspector Rose was weaving a trap for him. He had to think fast.

-All my money and identification were stolen at that hotel. The thief murdered two people.

-Do you know, Monsieur Clarone, Lieutenant Smith is a world-famous art fraud detective?

-No, I didn't know that.

-Inspector, just exactly what do you want from me? I have done nothing wrong.

Inspector Rose stared straight ahead.

-When did Dan Arris beat you?

- Before my taxi to Orly could leave the Ritz, Arris jumped in and hit me two times. Arris told the driver to stop, got out, turned and slugged me very hard in the right eye. I heard the bones in his hand crack.

-Did you fight back?

-No, the first punch doubled me up. He hit me in the ribs with the second punch.

-Has Arris been in touch with you since then?

-No. I never want to see the guy again.

-Did you tell him that?

-No. He left in a hurry.

Inspector Rose took Ben's keys out of her purse.

-Since you are here on a cultural mission and Lieutenant Harold Smith vouches for you, she explained, I am letting you remain free. If you leave the South of France for any reason, you are to contact me *before* you go. Here is my card and your keys. You may go about your evening's pleasures.

-Thank you, Inspector. Have a good evening.

Ben went to open the door, but there was no handle. The gendarme opened the door from the outside.

-One last thing, Monsieur Clarone. Stay away from Benjamin Aduyan, there is a warrant for his arrest.

Ben's heart stopped. How did she know that he had traveled to France as Benjamin Aduyan? Did Arris tell her that? How much did Arris spill about their art dealings?

-Yes, inspector, I shall.

The police car took its time leaving. Ben was about to start his car when Jean-Claude came running up to Ben. Ben rolled down the window.

-Ben, said Jean-Claude, was there some problem?

-Yes and no. They came to tell me that a close friend of mine died in Paris yesterday.

-That was a *Police judiciaire* car.

-It is nothing to worry about. I am sad, but I will be all right.

-You are not in trouble are you?

-No, no. You worry too much, Jean-Claude.

-Remember, no rehearsal tomorrow, but Monday afternoon at two, here at my home. Maestro Igor Markevitch will attend.

-Yes, I have not forgotten. I am late for the festivities at Villa Arson.

-Bien sûr. Enjoy yourself. You performed masterly this afternoon. Hausenstockmann is beside himself he is so happy.

-Thank you Jean-Claude. I must be going. Ciao, Ciao.

-Ciao.

Ben headed toward Nice. He stopped at a roadside telephone *cabine* and called Gabe Benjamin at Hotel Beau Rivage. The clerk said Monsieur Benjamin was not there.

-Did he leave a package or costume for Ben Clarone?

-No, not that I know.

-Do you know where he might have gone?

-No, he did not say.

-Thank you. Bonsoir.

Ben hung up. It was now after eight o'clock. He decided to go to Villa Arson. He would park the car and leave his contrabass and music in his studio. The mellow buzz he had from Hausenstockmann's fine wine had vanished in the presence of Inspector Rose. There was wine in his studio and for sure food and more wine at the party.

There was no parking near Villa Arson. He finally found a place two blocks away. It was at the bottom of the hill. Ben grabbed his contrabass and the boards with the music and started up the hill.

Three teenage kids brushed past Ben.

-Ouch! Damn it! One kid's jacket had caught on the boards and twisted Ben's sore ribs.

When Ben arrived at Villa Arson the gate was open and there was a uniformed guard from the museum on duty.

-Your name please? Asked the guard.

-Ben Clarone. I'm a new resident artist here.

The man looked on a list and waved Ben through.

The main party was at the school end of the grounds. There were skeletons, ghosts, vampires, zombies and a menagerie of mammals, birds and fish. A polar bear appeared to be wrestling a zombie with much laughter nearby on the dimly lit grounds.

A hip French band was jamming a *charanga*. A piccolo player was wailing a hot *obbligato*. The piccolo player reminded Ben of Arron Pfeifemann, who played great Latin jazz piccolo with him at Kutcher's Country Club in the Catskills in the early sixties.

Ben opened his studio, flipped on the light and slid his contrabass into the workspace. He walked into the bathroom and washed his hands and face.

-What a day, he said to himself. What a totally messed up day.

He went into the kitchen chose a bottle of wine, opened it and sat down to a glass at his kitchen table. He was hungry, but he was also worried. What did Inspector Rose know? What was that remark about Benjamin Adoyan? Did she know that he was Benjamin Adoyn? Was there a warrant for Ben Clarone? Couldn't be or she would have had the gendarme arrested him. Too many questions.

There was a knock on the door. Ben rose and answered it. An incredibly realistic ape handed him a package.

-Hey, Ben. Don't you recognize me? asked the ape.

-Gabe! How did you get here?

-Took a taxi. You remember that taxi guy at the airport, Victor Taxi? He brought me up here.

-Shit. Gabe, that guy is a cop and he's been following me since I landed in France.

-Well, he only knows me as an ape. I didn't tell him I was meeting you.

Ben was pissed. The whole day was one stressful shit storm. First he had a fight with Hausenstockmann, which he smoothed over by dint of his virtuosity. Then Inspector Lilly Rose rains on his parade. Now Gabe brings a spy to his studio. Not to mention that Claudia is dead and Dan Arris is probably out for his blood.

-Nice costume, said Ben. Is that mine in that bag?

-Yup. There's some nice young flesh out there. I can see you're going to have fun staying here.

-Want a glass of wine?

-No, I've got a flask. Want a hit of Dewar's?

Ben took a big swallow of the scotch. The whiskey warmed him all the way down. It went right to his head.

-Good stuff, said Ben.

-There's lots of good food at the party. We should get up there before it's all gone. Can I use your bathroom?

-Of course. Just don't get any ape piss on my floor.

Gabe helped Ben with his costume. Ben decided to not carry the birdcage. They both took a small hit on the flask and headed out to the party. Ben locked his studio and carefully put the key in an inside zippered pocket.

Ben didn't know anyone except Sophie and Michel from Villa Arson and they would be in costumes. The director, Yves Bernardi, and his wife he only knew as stag and she-wolf.

Ben and Gabe headed to the food tables. There were many choices, thin prosciutto, salmon, rolls stuffed with cheeses and sausages, small croissants stuffed with seafood, cheese plates, a variety of dips and pâtés with breads and vegetables. There were several large *cassoletees* and bowls of *ratatouille*. A dessert table groaned with sweetmeats of all kinds.

Ben and Gabe loaded plates and sat at a table. Everyone was on the dance floor dancing to the grooves of the cover band, *Vol Parfait*. It was a huge group of maybe a hundred or more fantastically costumed people.

-Hey Ben, let's go on the dance floor and dance.

-You want me to dance with *you*?

-No one is dancing with anyone. It's the 70's. They are just dancing communally.

-OK, I'll give them my smoothest moves.

They stepped on the edge of the dance floor, but soon found themselves in the middle of the gyrating throng.

-Wanna hump, birdman? Asked a six-foot rabbit sporting a huge erect member right out of Beardsley's drawings for *Lysistrata*.

-Quoi?

Ben moved away.

- Hey fart horn blower, since when have you been a bird catcher? Dracula asked in French accented English.

-Try the goose pâté, said a wild boar with a spiraling stiff hog penis, shoving it against Ben's hams.

-Christ, said Ben. What kind of a party is this? He looked for Gabe.

-Hey go with the flow, advised Gabe-the-apeman who was trading hip moves with a six-foot balloon breasted, cross-dressed Francesca da Rimini.

Ben slowly moved off the dance floor and found an unattended bottle of red wine. It was half full. Ben emptied it.

-If I'm going to dance with a bunch of fruitcakes, might as well lubricate myself.

Heading back to the dance floor, he spied a small person dressed as a colorful bird. He took his net and crept up on the bird.

-Ah, Papageno has you in his net. What will you do now?

-The bird shrieked.

-And who are you? Ben inquired in French.

-Jacques LeRoi. Let me free.

-Ah, the very son of Roi de Quoi, *n'est pas*?

-*Oui*, Papageno, please set me free.

-I should give you to the Queen for dinner.

-That's not in the opera Ben. I know you. Papa told me about you.

A large multi-person ant appeared from the lawn.

-Ah, you are not plump enough for the Queen. I will give you to this ant.

-Noooooo, shrieked Jacques.

-We are so hungry for a small bird, said the ant. Please give us this bird.

-I am Papageno the bird catcher. I will only give you this bird if you find me a wife.

-I am just a poor hungry ant, replied the ant. We know nothing of human wives, only fat queens.

-Yes, but this bird is the son of the Roi de Quoi in disguise, replied Ben. I must save him for the king, not a fat queen.

-Our queen is fat, but she is fecund, replied the ant, and rich in children, workers and warriors. Our army will devour all of you.

-I have heard of this, but on my plate is a prize richer than all the food of ants. If you give this bird and me safe passage, I shall give it to you?

-And what be this prize?

-A plump sticky baklava dripping in honey. It is more to the tongue than a boney small bird, which requires strong jaws.

-I will take the baklava, but only if you and your bird dance with me, demanded the ant.

-It's a deal. My prize bird Jacques and I will dance with you.

The trio, which was actually five persons, three being the ant, marched to the dance floor behind Ben dressed as Papageno playing his panpipes.

Vol Parfait started a cover of Sly Stone's *Higher*. A shout of approval went up from the crowd of dancers. Papageno, the bird and the ant got down to the music. The ant almost came apart with their movements. Before long a space was cleared on the dance floor and Papageno, the bird and the ant were dancing for the crowd, which clapped their hands in time to the music. Ben as Papageno led them in a circle dance that became a line dance. Soon the whole menagerie of costumed people joined in the dance. There were circles and circles of costumed dancers. It was a good fifteen minutes of tribal solidarity.

At the end, the bird had escaped and the ant was broken into three pieces.

A stag came up to Papageno.

-Ben, you were terrific. The party was becoming stale and you have rejuvenated it. Can you join the band?

-You ask them. A contrabass clarinet is not exactly the horn for this gig.

Ben and Yves Bernardi went up to the band, which was on a short break. Yves asked the bandleader if Villa Arson's resident musician could sit in for one tune.

- Bien sûr. What do you play?

-Flute, piccolo or saxes, Ben answered.

The bandleader disappeared. He returned with the reed player in the group.

-Gerard, said the leader to the reedman, the man who hired us would like to have this gentleman sit in with the band. Can you loan him an instrument?

-Do you know *Manteca*? the leader asked. We were going to start the next set with it.

-If you have a flute, piccolo or even an alto sax, I'd be happy to join you.

-What is your name?

-Ben, Ben Clarone.

-Not *the* Ben Clarone, said the reed player.

-None other. I'm a resident here for the next three weeks. Since I'm wearing Papageno's costume, a flute or piccolo might serve, but you are an excellent piccolo player, so give me your flute.

The band's reedman gave Ben his flute. It was a cheap student model, common among cover band reed players. No match for Ben's Powell flute, which was sitting in Jimmy's shop at Bright Star Recording Services in Manhattan.

The band started *Manteca*. When it came time for solos, Ben went first on flute. He played a good long solo on the flute with lots of growls, multiphonics and glisses. The reedman answered with a sprightly piccolo solo. One of the band's trumpet players did a great screech trumpet solo. After the band played the head again Ben started trading fours with the piccolo player. After two trades, Ben switched to the panpipes, which he took from his costume. He and the piccolo player went head-to-head. By over-blowing the pipes, he could play in the range of the piccolo player. Toward the end, the screech trumpet player joined in. It was an ear-piercing riot of high and higher pitches. The crowd went wild.

-Thank you, thank you, said the band leader. Thank you ladies and gentlemen. A big hand for Gerard Siffler on piccolo, Papageno on flute and panpipes and Herr Herman Lipp on trumpet.

And now, our next selection is the Allman Brother's *Sail Away*.

Ben left the back of the bandstand. Gabe-the-Apeman gave him the flask. Ben took a big hit. A small bird came up to Ben and put her tongue in his ear.

-Put me in your net and take me home.

To be continued.

