Five Million Yen: Chapter 43

by Daniel Harris

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Ben was in no mood for games. His ribs hurt and his eye was painful. He would have to tell this girl, who had flicked her tongue in his ear and who did not sound like Sophie, to get lost

-Gabe, will you dance with this canary? asked Ben.

-What's the matter Ben? You don't like young birds suddenly?

-No man, my ribs are killing me and I need to put ice on my eye. I should call it a night and get some rest. I haven't had a good night's sleep in weeks.

-Okay, Ben. Whatever you say. Do you want to meet for lunch tomorrow?

-Yeah, a late lunch. I'll call you. Sorry, little canary, some other time.

It was hard to tell the girl in the canary costume to get lost, but Ben was in no mood for sport. Besides, he only had a single cot in his studio. Ben also didn't want Yves Bernardi, the director of Villa Arson, to think that he was going to have a continuous parade of women in and out of his studio.

Ben was about to leave for his studio when another canary came up to him.

-Monsieur Ben Clarone, there is a phone call for you at reception, said this new canary in Sophie's voice.

-Sophie, do you know who it is? asked Ben.

-Monsieur Dan Arris.

Ben felt all the pain of Arris's punch in his gut.

-Can you tell him I will telephone him tomorrow?

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-He said to get you on the phone. He would take no excuses. The guard, who took the call, told him you were here, said Sophie.

-*Merde*, said Ben.

Ben stood looking at two canaries and Gabe in his ape costume. He felt like he was going to the gallows in a surreal cartoon.

-Ben, did you meet my sister Rachel? said the canary with the phone message.

-Who is Rachel?

-I am Rachel, said the other canary.

The two girls took off their masks. They were identical twins.

-Now I'm really confused, said Ben. Don't move, or I'll forget who is who

Each girl put their hand in their masks.

-We are birds of a feather, mouthed the mask Sophie was holding in a voice that was neither Sophie's nor Rachel's.

Sophie had a tight grin on her face. Rachel looked Ben square in the eye.

-Monsieur Clarone, we are ventriloquist sisters, said the canary mask, mouthing Rachel's words in a man's voice.

-Whoa, do that again, said Gabe.

-Rachel and I are identical twins and we both are ventriloquists, said the canary mask Sophie was holding.

-You are a bad bird, said Sophie in her normal voice. No one is to know we are ventriloquists.

-Yes, said the other canary mask in the man's voice.

-You stay out of this, ordered Rachel in her normal voice.

-You think you are so smart, Sophie. Anyone can see that you and Rachel are *identical* twins. *We* canaries look identical, but are fraternal twins. Same nest, different eggs. Not everything is as it appears, said Rachel's canary mask in the man voice.

-You mean all that glitters is not gold? said Sophie's canary.

-Watch that, or I'll give you a good pecking, said Rachel's canary.

-Oh, you and your pecker threats, replied Sophie's canary.

-I have a good hard pecker, said Rachel's canary.

-Don't start that woodpecker bragging again, retorted Sophie's canary, snapping her beak.

-Help! Get me out of here, said Ben. I have to take this telephone call. Gabe, keep these girls safe until I return.

Ben turned and walked toward the gate. The twins donned their masks. Each took one of Gabe's ape arms, as they headed toward the dance floor.

-Here he comes now, said the guard into the telephone.

Ben could read frustration in the guard's face.

-Sorry to be so long, said Ben. It took Sophie some time to find me.

-Here he is now, said the guard into the telephone. You can take it in the *cabine*.

Ben went in the *cabine* and closed the door.

-Arris, what's up?

-I've got a few questions for you, Clarone.

-Shoot, said Ben.

-Did you get the telegram from Gringovitch about the painting mix-up?

-Yes.

-What did you do with the painting?

-As you probably know, Yolande's restaurant had been bombed. I took the painting back to Gabe's hotel. He put it in his bank safe deposit vault. Ben lied about this last since the painting was actually in Roi de Quoi's locked storage cage at the opera.

-Good. Leave it there. We won't need it for a couple of weeks.

-So how did you get Yolande's third of the 100-franc note?

-It was wedged in with her other mail in the security gate of her restaurant. I liberated it.

-Good move. It wouldn't have been good if the *flics* had found it

There was a long silence.

-Where is the other painting?

-I delivered it to Find Arts in Marseille. Sidran hadn't received the envelope, but he wrote me a receipt. I gave the receipt and all

three parts of the 100-franc note to Miguel Martine at his *bouquiniste*. He gave me the poster.

-If I didn't know you are a knucklehead, I'd think you are scamming me.

-That's a lot of bull. Find Arts has one of the paintings and the other is in a bank vault in Nice.

There was silence, but Ben could hear street noises. Arris was using a public phone.

-Clarone, how much money did Claudia give you?

-20,000 francs.

-That bitch. I told her, and you know, that you were to get 5,000 francs on delivery and the remaining 15,000 francs when the deal was complete.

-Arris, I'm done with art deals. So just leave me out of it. And why did you kill Claudia?

-Why were you screwing her?

-Because she begged me to and she liked me.

-You bastard. What makes you think I killed her?

-The police implied that when they interrogated me. It's not good to give a partner a black eye.

-When did they interrogate you? And who?

-The gendarmes at Orly.

-What did you tell them?

-Jealous husband. I said Americans weren't as sanguine about their wives being other men's mistresses.

-You are some piece of work, Clarone. Did anyone else interrogate you?

-Actually a few hours ago. Inspector Lilly Rose of the *Police Judiciaire* questioned me for over an hour.

-What did she want?

-She wanted to know why you beat the shit out of me.

-What did you tell her?

-The same as the gendarmes in Paris. She asked a lot of questions about the sex Claudia and I had. She wanted to know what

kind and how often. Whether I used a condom. I was shocked at how personal her questions were.

-I hope she made you squirm, snarled Arris.

-Well, she said the forensics people found copious amounts of semen in her nasal passages, rectum and vagina, said Ben grinning to himself as he turned the jealousy screw.

-You dago bastard.

-I told Inspector Rose that I knew you were using Claudia as a honey trap, since I had seen the telegram you sent her in her purse on the flight from JFK. I figured I'd consume all the honey while I had the chance. You didn't seem to mind.

-You are lucky I'm talking to you on the phone.

-Why, you want to kill me too?

-Yes, but very, very slowly.

There was another silence.

-Well, Arris, I have a party to attend. So if you don't have any more questions, I'll hang up for the night.

-Wait a minute. You're still going to have to earn your 15,000 francs. I'll be calling you in a few days with more instructions.

-I quit the art business.

-Not until the job is done. The buyer of the Gorky painting is Arno Aghajanian, your estranged wife's divorce lawyer. Maybe you can set me up with Zoë, so I can show her what she's been missing in her sex life.

-She might like that, Arris. Just get her good and drunk, advised Ben knowing Zoe never had sex when she was drunk because she couldn't stop laughing.

-Thanks for the tip. I'll bring champagne.

-Her favorite.

-But I have a few jobs for you, which you owe me, *capice*?

Ben thought about it for a few seconds

-No rough stuff. Deliveries only, said Ben.

-There won't be any rough stuff, if you keep your nose clean.

-It's never been dirty.

-I phone. You answer. Understand?

-No problem, Arris. One final word of advice: INTERPOL and the *Police judiciaire* have tails on both of us. Keep *your* nose clean. Use anonymous phones.

Ben hung up the phone before Arris could speak.

-Bad news? asked the guard.

-A mutual friend of ours died yesterday in Paris, replied Ben.

-Sorry to hear that. My condolences.

-Thank you. I need a drink. Thank you for taking the call and finding me.

-You are welcome, Monsieur Clarone.

Ben walked back to the party. He would say good-night to Gabe, Sophie Kessel and her sister Rachel, then hit the bed. He found them by the bandstand.

-You look upset, Ben, said Gabe. Put your mask back on.

-It was not a good phone call, said Ben.

Sophie and Rachel and the two canaries all began talking at once.

-How the hell did you do that? asked Ben

Again all four voices began talking at once.

-Gabe can you believe this? These girls are amazing.

-They should be in show business, said Gabe.

-We were, said Rachel and Sophie simultaneously in their normal voices.

-We didn't like it, continued Rachel. We quit. Everyone only wanted a talking dummy and a straight man, not four talking dummies and identical twin girls.

The bandleader was asking for Ben to come back to the bandstand for one final song.

-I'll see you after, said Ben. I must go play my pipes for small change.

Ben mounted the bandstand.

-What's up?

-We want to do a real Eddie Palimari Cuban *mozambique* and you and Gerard will play piccolos.

-But I only have these panpipes, complained Ben.

-It didn't stop you before, Clarone. Come on. Join in. It will be a big Cuban *mozambique* jam.

It was a recap of the previous performance, but even longer and wilder. Ben and Gerard, the piccolo player in the band, took the tune way, way outside. The trumpet player joined in with incredible screeches. The trombone player and the guitarist found a groove that gave kick to the improvising. The timbale player and piano player were in overdrive.

All the dancers were trying to sing or whistle higher than the piccolo. Hips were gyrating and the dancers became a whirling whistling cyclone of sexual heat.

No one wanted it to end. But at eleven, the bandleader took the microphone and called a halt to it all.

-I'm afraid the party is over for this year. The agreement with the neighbors is that it would stop at eleven, announced Yves Bernardi in his stag costume. Give a big thank you to the band, *Vol Parfait*, and to our visiting musician, Ben Clarone.

A big shout went up from the crowd. They started rhythmically clapping in hopes of getting the band to play another song, but half the band had their instruments in their cases. They had another gig at a private party in an hour.

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Ben, Gabe and the Hessel twins sat at Ben's kitchen table. Gabe and Ben had drained Gabe's flask and they were now drinking the last bottle of wine in the house. The twins were sitting wearing their canary heads on their right hands.

-I've had too much wine, hiccupped the Rachel's male voice.

-Did you just hiccup in your other voice Rachel? asked Ben

-Well, *I* didn't hiccup, proclaimed Rachel.

-I'm *schnockered*, said Ben twisting his nose with his hand.

- *Schnoggered*? Asked Sophie? What's *smockered*.

-*Schnockered*, said Ben, means drunk.

-Sounds Dutch, said Gabe. *Schnockered*.

-Drunk as a Dutchman, said Sophie's alternate voice. She drooped her canary head on the table.

-She's out for the count, said Rachel.

Ben poured the last of the wine.

-To art, toasted Gabe.

-To art, repeated five voices.

-This is so strange Ben, said Gabe, two girls and four voices.

-To music, toasted Ben.

-To music, toasted the two girls with four voices and Gabe.

They raised their glasses in a toast.

-Speaking of Dutch, I have a Dutch song.

-Sing it Ben, said Sophie in her normal voice.

Oh Dunderbeck, Oh Dunderbeck!
How could you be so mean?
I told you you'd be sorry for
Inventing that machine.
For all the neighbors' dogs and cats
Will never more be seen;
They'll all be ground to sausage meat
in Dunderbeck's machine!

- Where the hell did you get that from, Ben? asked Gabe.

-I don't know. We sang it in my Chicago neighborhood when I was a kid. That's the chorus. I can't remember the verses.

-That's disgusting, said Rachel's alternate male voice.

-Look who's talking, pecker-head, said Sophie's alternate voice.

-I wouldn't talk with that beak on your face, replied the male canary.

-You know why you are so ugly? asked Sophie's canary.

-No, why?

-Your pecker is on your face, replied Sophie's canary bursting into heavy laughter.

-Very funny beak-head, replied Rachel's canary

The two canary heads started fighting.

-Stop. Stop right now, said Sophie in her normal voice.

-You heard Sophie, behave yourselves, or it's bedtime, ordered Rachel in her normal voice.

-This is crazy. I have to go to bed. Bottoms up, said Ben.

-It's only twelve-thirty, said Gabe.

-It's bedtime for me, said Ben.

-We can drop you at your hotel, said Rachel to Gabe.

-Are you sober enough to drive? asked Gabe.

-It's downhill from here. We live near the old city, it's an easy to drop you at Beau Rivage.

-Hey, you old ape, don't forget late lunch tomorrow.

-You're on. Call me.

Ben gave Rachel a goodnight hug and kiss. He turned to Sophie.

-Give me a real hug, Ben, she whispered in his ear.

-Easy on my ribs, said Ben, enveloping her in his arms.

-I will wake you tomorrow when I come to work.

To be continued.