

Five Million Yen: Chapter 44

by Daniel Harris

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Sophie never woke Ben on Sunday morning. Ben did not call Gabe for lunch. Ben woke at four in the afternoon. If Sophie had knocked on his door, he didn't hear it. He took a long shower, dressed and left to find something to eat.

When he passed by the reception area, Michel was manning the desk.

-Bonjour, Monsieur Clarone.

-Michel, please call me Ben.

-Yes, Monsieur Clarone. You were amazing last night.

-Do you mean because I was drunk, or something else?

-Your playing. Everyone was astounded that such a virtuoso musician is in residence at Villa Arson.

-Thank you, Michel, but call me Ben. Where's Sophie?

-She did not come to work today. I am substituting for her. We alternate Sundays and this was her Sunday to work, but she called me and asked me to switch.

-Do you have any messages for me? asked Ben.

-No, no phone calls. A Monsieur Benjamin stopped at the desk and asked for you, but you did not answer your buzzer. He said he would contact you later.

-Thank you Michel. Can you recommend a nearby restaurant?

-This late on Sunday is difficult. You should go to the tourist area and you will find an open restaurant.

-Isn't there something in the neighborhood?

-I'm afraid not, only a pizza truck on Gorbella.

-Thank you Michel. You leave at six, correct?

-Yes, the gates are locked at six, so take your gate key.

-Yes, I have all my keys. Now I have to remember where I parked my car.

-Monsieur Clarone tomorrow is a holiday, so it will be Sunday hours at reception, noon to six.

-Thank you Michel. Please call me Ben.

-Yes Monsieur Clarone.

Ben passed through the gate, oriented himself and headed down the hill where he thought his car was parked. It was not there. He walked back up the hill and tried another street. Again his car was not at the bottom of the hill.

-This is becoming the myth of Sisyphus, said Ben to himself.

Finally he found it at the bottom of rue Stephen Liegeard near Avenue Cyrille Besset.

Ben checked the car for dings and scratches. None. There was a paper under the driver's side windshield wiper. He pulled it out and read it.

In block printing were the words, ADOYAN WILL KILL YOU.

Ben was taken aback. He had been Benjamin Adoyan when he entered France from New York. Who besides the police and Dan Arris in France knew him as Benjamin Adoyan? Miguel Martine, owner of the *Bouquiniste* near Pont Neuf. Claudia, but she was dead. Isabella Sanitizzare? Who would know my car?

-What the hell does that mean? And who left this and who wrote it? Ben said out loud to himself. He folded the message and put it in his pocket.

He found a place to park on the Quai des États-Unis near the Opera. The restaurants in the Cours Saleya were closed or closing. He found a small place on a side street, Bar Oiseaux Étotérique. There was a sign on the door that read: *Jazz Ce Soir*: Giovanni Lezardino: *Jazz grillé et sautés*. Ben had met Lezardino at the Newport Jazz Festival last year.

Ben read the menu posted outside. It was French style bar food. Ben walked into the bar. There were cages with various kinds of

parrots placed about the establishment. One parrot kept whistling Charlie Parker's famous *Koko* solo.

The sound system was playing Sonny Rollin's *Saint Thomas* from Sonny's album *Saxophone Colossus*. A small grey parrot was trying to keep up with Sonny. Ben was appreciative of the musical humor.

-Monsieur? asked the *patronne*, a woman in her late forties who looked like she had been in the bar trade for enough years to know how to run a jazz club. A Gauloise cigarette hung from her heavily rouged lips.

-Do you serve food? asked Ben in French.

-*Oui*, food service begins at seven. Only the bar is open now.

-I can't sit and drink for two hours, I'm starved, said Ben.

-You look familiar, what is your name? asked the *patronne*.

-Ben, Ben Clarone. I am a musician.

-BEN CLARONE? exclaimed the *patronne*.

-Indeed, the very man himself, said Ben smiling.

-Come, come, I will feed you. This is a Mecca for jazz in Nice.

She led Ben to a table.

-My name is Chjara, she said in English, which means Claire in English. I'm Corsican by birth, but have owned bars in Nice and Rome for thirty years. I love jazz and jazz players. When I was younger I slept with some of the greatest.

-I'm Ben Clarone; I've never slept with a club owner. But then most of my work is hidden in the recording studio.

-Don't be so modest, we know you. Your group *Pieces of Eight* has performed at *La Grande Parade du Jazz* many times.

-Thank you, but I'm very hungry.

-The featured dinner tonight is *coq au vin*.

-That sounds wonderful; may I have a *pastis* now? asked Ben.

-*Bien sûr*. But, tell me, who was that black woman trombone player in the old *Pieces of Eight*?

-That's the amazing Clovis "Balls" Pennymaker. Her husband, the sculpture Michel Marteau, carved a statue of her near *Théoule-sur-Mer*, west of Cannes. Marteau stole her from my band in 1966, so you are talking about *La Grande Parade du Jazz* from a decade ago.

-Yes, that's true, but I hear her occasionally playing on the *Côte d'Azur*.

-I've never found anyone as perfect for *Pieces of Eight* as her.

-Well, she is playing tonight here with Giovanni Lezardino, the astounding vibraphonist, but she calls herself Clovis Marteau.

-Clovis, here tonight? said Ben.

-Yes, she will be here tonight.

-I have to stay and hear her. But first, may I have that *pastis* and perhaps some *cacahuètes et olives*.

The *patronne* went behind the bar and prepared the *pastis* and made up a plate of peanuts and olives. She added a small plate of *foie gras* and *petite grille*.

-This should hold you until the chef can prepare your plate, said the *patronne* serving Ben.

-Thank you. I am starved. I haven't really had a good meal in weeks, said Ben forgetting his wonderful meal at Gage & Tollner in Brooklyn. I have been on the road for over three months. Brutal.

-I read that you are playing with the *L'Orchestre de Monte Carlo*. You will be here for three weeks. Now you will have good French food everyday.

-That's my plan, but it hasn't worked out that way.

-Such is life, she said.

-Sounds like a Corsican gangster looking on the corpse of his dead enemy.

-We Corsicans are not all like that, said the *patronne*

-Well, I read about Yolande's restaurant being bombed.

-She and her husband are crazy. They are mixed up in drugs, guns, and bombs. They finance their illegal activities by fencing stolen art.

-Sounds dangerous, said Ben sipping his *pastis*.

-Yes, and there are rumors that they also get help from the KGB. There is a movement to destabilize France. The Soviets are stirring up Corsicans, Algerians and Moroccans against France. It is a big mess and it leads to problems for me.

Inspector Louis Renault from the *Police judiciaire* stops here frequently asking annoying questions and looking at my books

-I hope he's not the Inspector Louis Renault who was abetting Viktor Laszlo, said Ben referencing the film *Casablanca*.

-A wish is just a wish, but I'm no Ingrid Bergman or Rick Blaine, said Chjara.

-I guess we'll put Mr. Laszlo's luggage on the plane and wait for dinner, said Ben picking up on the lines in the film.

-That's why I love you jazz men. You all have a good grasp of life and culture.

-Thanks, but I'm some backroom guy, making stars famous in New York. This Monte Carlo gig is a rare opportunity to be a small time star.

-I don't think so. Are the music selections good for you?

-Couldn't be better and the parrots love it. It sounds like Charles Ives.

-Charles Ives?

-Yes, an American composer from the early twentieth century. Composed wonderful music that was almost impossible to play. His *Fourth Symphony* is a masterpiece of Americana. He would love sitting here and listening to the parrots sing with and against the music you have on the sound system. Ives was probably the first musical collage artist. Check him out.

-I guess I will have to, since you seem to like him.

The patronne left to attend to some business. Ben sat and listened to *Saxophone Colossus* and a dozen parrots whistling jazz solos from who knows where.

Ben was in the men's room when Giovanni Lezardino arrived. When Ben returned to his table, Clovis entered the club. She spotted Ben immediately.

-Ben! What are you doing here? she asked with great enthusiasm.

-Having a bite. I read that some musicians I know are going to play here tonight.

-I saw you three days ago and now you seem like you've lost weight. You must eat Ben.

-Well, I just put away a complete *coq a vin*. But, you are correct; I have not had a reliable food source.

-Come, said Clovis, let me introduce you to Lezardino, or Lez as his friends call him.

Ben followed Clovis up to the small bandstand. Lezardino was assembling his vibraphone.

-Lez, this is my old bandleader, Ben Clarone, said Clovis in her rich Negro voice.

Lez was talking to himself and cursing out his instrument, which had some mechanical issues.

-What was that Clovis? asked Lez.

-I want you to meet my old band director Ben Clarone, said Clovis saying it as if Ben had been her fourth grade music teacher.

-Bonjour, said Lez still distracted by his instrument.

-Lez, get with it, this is Ben Clarone, repeated Clovis.

Lezardino looked up and saw Ben. A big smile crossed his face.

-Clovis why didn't you say my man Mister Brown was here? said Lez.

Ben had met Lez at *the Newport Jazz Festival* the year before. They had hit it off at first sight, but Ben had to leave before they could get to know each other.

The thing was Lez loved his pipe and had run out of dope. Ben made a phone call and procured some smoke for Lez. Lez loved the dealer/client phone conversation, which went like this:

-*Mr. Brown?*

-*Mr. Green?*

-*Black Pearl.*

Ben had taken Lez in his car to the Black Pearl, a yacht sailor's bar at Newport Harbor, and bought Lez a lid of dope.

-Hey Mister Brown, how are you?

-Fine, fine. It's amazing I found you in this town on a Sunday night, said Ben.

-Well, as you told me, no gig too far, no pay too low for a jazzman. They grinned at each other.

-Will you sit in on this gig? asked Lez.

-The only axe I have in Nice is my contrabass clarinet.

-Go get it. You can play bass lines and solos, said Lez.

-Are you sure? asked Ben.

-Absolutely. There is no bass here tonight and my other front line players besides Clovis, are an accordionist and a violist with electronic processing.

-When does the gig start? asked Ben.

-In an hour. Plenty of time for you to get your axe, said Lez.

-If you're sure it's okay, I'll go get my horn

When Ben returned, Bar Oiseaux Ésothérique was packed and there was a line snaking down the street. The sign by the front door had been changed to: *Jazz Ce Soir* : Giovanni Lezardino et Ben Clarone: *Jazz grillé et sautés*.

Lez gave Ben some sheet music with the tunes for the night's gig. Lez, whose style was an esoteric mix of mainstream jazz and obscure traditional Provençal songs, composed all the tunes.

There was barely room on the bandstand for the five musicians and their instruments. Lez's vibraphone and the violist's electronics took up the lion's share of the space. Ben kept a low profile for the first few tunes as he didn't know the book or the tempos. Ben was riding on the uniqueness of the sound of his instrument. Finally Lez, called up a tune that was medium up-tempo. Ben told Lez it should be fast be-bop tempo.

-Are you sure? asked Lez.

-Trust me. I'll start it, said Ben.

Ben gave the count-off and launched the melody at a blistering tempo. The second time through the tune, Clovis joined in with a counter melody part. Soon Lez was wailing away on the vibes. The other two musicians figured out how to fit in and the ensemble began to find a real be-bop up-tempo groove. By the time the tune ended twenty minutes later, Lez had broken a slew of mallets, Ben was exhausted and Clovis's lips were blistered, but there were smiles all around.

-Take a break, said Lez.

The violist pulled a dozen loose hairs from his bow. Ben & Clovis each poured water out of their horns.

-Time for a pipe, said Lez

The band adjourned out the back door onto another side street. Chjara found them passing the pipe.

-Can I get you anything to drink? she asked.

-Beer, said Clovis. The rest of the band except Lez agreed.

-No gas, no ice. Give me a pastis, demanded Lez.

-Ben, you are a fucking crazy man, said Lez proud to display his savvy with American profanity.

-Whatsamateryou? said Ben in pseudo-Brooklyn Italian, no grease in those wrists?

-Can you believe how much cigarette smoke there is in that club? said the violist. I couldn't see two tables into the club.

-Think of those poor birds. Every night breathing in all that smoke, said Clovis.

-Fuck the birds. We have to play another set. The last tune we will improvise on a John Cage text I will read.

-In French or English, asked Ben.

-French, of course said Lez.

-What's the text? asked Clovis.

Les pulled out a copy of John Cage's *Silence*.

-Here is the text I have chosen from *45' For A Speaker*:

*These pieces
take into consideration the physical
action of playing an instrument.
You won't find this in books.
"Why do you not do as I do? Letting
go of your thoughts
as though
they were
the cold ashes of a long
dead fire?"*

-That's heavy stuff, Lez, said Ben.

-What does that mean? asked the violist.

-Just follow me, said Lez. Think about it.

The second set was better than the first set. When they got to the last tune, the improvisation based on Cage's writing. Lez started it off by whispering the text into one of the resonance tubes of his vibraphone. The house was very quiet.

Ben started with some *sotto voce* low primordial low notes on the contra. It built from there. Towards the end, arms, tongues, hands, fingers, bows and slides were flying as the music reached a fever pitch. At the very zenith, Lez pitched his vibes off the stage in a mighty crash. The crowd gave a collective gasp. Lez took off his shirt and began whipping the tubes of his crashed vibes with it, eliciting echoes of ancient lost sounds. Ben and Clovis made tiny barely audible sounds in accompaniment.

As the music faded away, Lez put his shirt on and took a bow.

The audience stood shouting, stamping their feet and clapping in unison.

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Only Ben, Lez and Claire were left in the bar. Lez's vibes were still lying on the floor in front of the bandstand. He had been entertaining admirers with meaningful snappy patter.

-I hope it was a good night for the bar, said Ben.

-I wish this group could play here every night. Best night we've had in months. Thank you. Thank you.

-Well, Ben, said Lez, as we say, no gig too far, no pay too low. Thanks for playing. I'm embarrassed to tell you how little I have to pay you.

-Hey man, you don't owe me anything. I was just sitting in, not subbing.

-Are you sure? asked Lez.

-Between brothers, would I lie? said Ben.

-Thanks, bro.

-I've got to split. I have a big rehearsal tomorrow with Markevitch and Hausenstockmann. It should be fun and games, said Ben.

-Here's my phone number. I'm staying with an old girlfriend in Nice for the week. Give me a call. I can introduce you to some local hotshots.

-Sounds like a plan. I'm staying at Villa Arson, so you can always leave a message if I'm not there.

-*Bien sûr.*

-*Bon nuit* Claire. Thank you for the dinner.

-Ben, thank you for the wonderful music, said Claire giving Ben a big kiss on the cheek.

-For you Claire, nothing but the best, said Ben with a warm smile.

To be continued.

