

# Five Million Yen: Chapter 46

*by* Daniel Harris

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Ben was half-awake listening to rain fall on the roof above him. The ringing of multiple telephones interrupted his reverie. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he wondered where the telephones *were*. Phones rang in several rooms, but not in the bedroom. Before he could stand up to look for the phone, he heard an outgoing message that was followed by the caller's voice:

—Ben, this is Isabella. I thought I better tell you the telephone number. I forgot to give it to you last night. The ...

Ben noticed there was a phone that apparently didn't ring next to the bed. He picked up the handset.

—Isabella, this is Ben, he said interrupting her message.

—Ben, I hope I didn't wake you. It's almost eight in the morning. Do you have a pencil and paper? I will give you the telephone number at your new residence.

—Hold on, replied Ben.

He found his backpack on a chair in the bedroom. In a front pocket were pens, pencils, and the notebook he was using as an address book. It was his mobile stationary store. He liked the pun.

—Okay, I'm ready, said Ben.

—The country code is 33. 06 is Nice city code, locally only dial 45 60 60 60, instructed Isabella.

—That's pretty easy, a forty-five degree angle and the angles of an equal lateral triangle.

—Ben you are one strange guy, said Isabella. Did you sleep all right?

—Like a baby. I haven't slept in a bed this fine in months.

—If you don't want to take a bath, there is a great shower down the hall.

—Thanks, I discovered that last night. It's almost as strong as Gringovitch's shower in Brooklyn.

—Also, I arranged for the housekeeper to come on Mondays to do your laundry and clean.

—What is that going to cost me?

—Nothing, she normally cleans on Mondays, even if the owners are not staying there.

—You're a real take-charge woman, Isabella. I like that. I owe you.

—Well, there was mention of helping me procure a Gringovitch painting or two for Centre Nationale d'Art Contemporain at Villa Arson.

—I'm working on that. I have to call my service in New York to get Gringovitch's telephone number in Rome. All my belongings were stolen in New York when I returned from my three-month global tour.

—Really? That's a bummer.

—It's worse, but no need to go into that. I'm here in Nice, working and enjoying my visit, especially now that I'm out of the prying eyes of Yves Bernardi.

—Ben, I don't know if you know, but my good friend Claudia Monschaud died in Paris last Friday.

—What? Claudia dead? said Ben. I saw her four days ago in Paris. She was vibrant and full of life.

—I assumed you were part of her circle. You did travel to Marseilles with us and on to Paris with her.

—Yes, I knew Claudia, but not intimately. We flew together often, said Ben, tongue-in-cheek.

—Well, she spoke fondly of you. I assumed you knew her well. Her estranged husband, Dan Arris, says he thought for sure you were cuckolding him.

—When a man's marriage is failing, he becomes suspicious of everyman. I'm positive my beautiful estranged spouse, the actress Zoë Bontemps, has given me horns more than once, replied Ben.

—My plane for Paris leaves in an hour, said Isabella. I must attend a private memorial service for Claudia. After the cremation, Arris wants me to be custodian of her ashes until he can find a proper place for burial.

—What a sad mission, said Ben. *Bon courage*, mon ami.

—Thank you, Ben, said Isabella. Keep your nose clean while I'm gone. I can't rescue you from Paris, you know.

Ben hung up the phone.

—That was a good fencing match, said Ben to himself. She was lying to me and I was lying to her. What did Yousef Al Sidran say: Be wary of Isabella and her grandmother Ida. They will seduce you and then destroy you.

Ben called Gabe at the Hotel Beau Rivage.

—Gabe Benjamin speaking.

—Gabe, it's Ben. When can I get the painting from Le Roi de Quoi?

—He told me the opera rehearsal breaks at 10:30. We can walk over from my hotel and pick it up and then have lunch.

—Sounds like a plan. I'm going to scout the neighborhood for stores and some breakfast.

—Breakfast is a little slim in Nice. You can get a good omelet at the train station. I think that is your best bet. You might find a neighborhood café that has substantial breakfasts, but it's not the usual French way.

—Thanks for the tip. I'll meet you a little before 10:30.

Ben showered, dressed, found an umbrella by the front door and went down to the street. The rain was just strong enough to be annoying. It was also windy, making the umbrella useless. There was a cozy restaurant around the corner from his place that served a

hearty breakfast. Ben had a Brie and ham omelet and a terrific croissant. The coffee was matchless. There was a poster in the window for his Monte Carlo concert, but no one recognized him.

Ben didn't like the whiff of the relationship between Dan Arris and Isabella Sanitizzare. Quite possibly Isabella had replaced Claudia as Arris's honey trap. Isabella was acting much friendlier and familiar than before. Before she had been cold, even rude. He hadn't seen her since the ride to Marseilles except for last night. Nothing he'd done was worthy of this change. He was so preoccupied with these thoughts, that he almost forgot his umbrella when he left the restaurant.

He decided to chance driving to Gabe's hotel. Parking was always difficult and, for sure, in rain it would be worse. It could have been Manhattan. It took Ben twenty minutes to find a parking space and it was a one-hour meter.

After a so-so early lunch, Ben left for Marseilles. The sun was out, but there were scattered showers along the way. After a few wrong turns in Marseilles, Ben finally found a parking place near Découvrir Art.

Walking to the building, he thought of the mnemonic for remembering the code to enter the building. Claudia's bra size: 36, and then C7 mambo. Ben punched in 36C7. The lock clicked and Ben started the long climb to the top floor. When he reached the door of Découvrir Art, there was a sign on the door: Closed.

—Merde, said Ben out loud.

He rang the buzzer and knocked the door. Things were not working out. He didn't know what to do. He had no telephone number for Découvrir Art. He pushed open the door of the stairwell and heard the tread of an old man. Hopefully that was the step of Griolamo Dente. And so it was. Signore Dente was carrying the day's mail and a baguette.

—Ah, Clarone. I'm very sorry, I thought you were coming earlier. I went for the mail and a baguette. I hope you haven't been waiting long.

—Only a few minutes, said Ben.

—Clarone, I think you will be pleased with what I have done.

Girolamo unlocked the door and waved Ben into the outer office. On an easel next to the big desk was *Abstract with Yellow*. Girolamo went into the studio and brought out the *Abstract with Yellow* that Gringovitch had painted in gouache over Dan Arris's forgery of Ashille Gorky's *Unfaithful Wife*. To Ben's eye, they were the same, except the acrylic copy was much richer with more depth.

—Just amazing, exclaimed Ben.

—Thank you. This artist has a wonderful sense of line and color. Abstract is not my *métier*, but I appreciate the art behind this painting. It helps to copy it. You sleep with it for a time and, like a woman, you learn her passions and taboos.

—You got that right, replied Ben.

—I think one of the letters on the desk is for you said Girolamo pointing to a pile of envelopes on the desk. Look through them.

Ben saw a pile of envelopes on the big desk. There was one with a Brooklyn postmark and no return address. Ben opened it. It contained the missing portion of the 100-franc note. He put the note in his wallet and stuffed the envelope in his pocket for later disposal.

—Let me see the new painting, said Girolamo.

He helped Ben remove the painting from its box. There it was: *The Black and The Red*.

—Now this is good, very good, said Girolamo, nodding his head and smiling.

—It is an amazing painting. I could almost play it as a piece of music, said Ben.

—Yes, said Girolamo, stepping back to take a different measure of the painting. This will take me more time. It is much more complicated. Maybe I can have it for you next Monday. I'm going to enjoy this one.

—I don't know my schedule yet, so I will have to call you. Won't Yousef have returned from China by Monday? asked Ben.

—No, the Monday after. But I will give you my home number. Call me there.

Ben copied down the number.

—I will telephone you next Monday.

—Would you like to share some bread and wine with me? asked Girolamo.

—A small bite. I have to drive back to Nice. I have work to do when I return.

They ate mostly in silence. The radio was playing some early 17th century music.

—Gesualdo, said Girolamo, a composer two centuries ahead of his time.

—Yes, replied Ben. I think this piece is from the late madrigals.

—Do you know Gesualdo killed his first wife and her lover in *flagrante delecto*? said Girolamo.

—Yes, I was telling a police detective that story a week ago in New York City. It was the answer to one of the questions in a crossword puzzle. Amazing, the knowledge a cruciverbalist must possess.

Girolamo looked askance at Ben.

—Cruciverbalist, explained Ben, is a person who makes or solves crossword puzzles.

Girolamo dipped some bread into his glass of wine. He gave Ben a close look.

—I probably shouldn't tell you this, but there is a man who comes here who said he knew you were cuckolding him. He wanted to put a bullet through you and his unfaithful wife.

—Do you remember his name? asked Ben.

—Yes, we do business with him often. Girolamo paused and gave Ben a long hard look. You never heard this from me, Mr. Clarone, he continued. The man's name is Dan Arris, an art dealer.

Ben thought he had a possible answer to what happened to dear Claudia. Arris must have somehow made Claudia's death look like an accident. Now he was sure that if he and Claudia had enjoyed each other in the Ritz, Arris would have killed them both. What were Arris's plans for him now? What was Isabella's role?

—I better hope that he's not a good assassin, said Ben.

—Yousef says he's a tough man. Worked both sides of the street when he was in jail. He was a forger working for the CIA against the Soviets and also a spy for the KGB working for Moscow. There is a rumor he killed a double agent in prison on orders from the KGB and was released shortly by the Americans.

Ben didn't know what to say, but if this Girolamo was correct, he better stay away from Arris.

—I have to take a short siesta, said Girolamo. You can stay if you wish and look at the paintings,

—I better hit the road. I have a lot of work yet to do.

Ben's mind was working overtime on the trip back to Nice. Why would Arris want to kill him? He had fulfilled his part of the bargain. And what about Isabella? Was she going to end up like Claudia, or was she going to protect him from Arris, or help Arris kill him? He should contact Gringovitch as soon as possible and see what Gringovitch knew. He knew he should tell Gringovitch about the paintings Girolamo Dente was making, but he wanted to have the acrylic copies in hand before doing so. Possession was power in any situation, especially one as potentially volatile as this could be.

Ben stopped at a Casino Supermarche and bought a half case of white wine and half case of red. He also bought two bottles of serviceable Scotch and a two-liter bottle of vodka. Near the Nice airport, he filled the gas tank.

After a shower and a big glass of Scotch, Ben hung Girolamo's acrylic copy of *Abstract with Yellow* in the den. There were several other recent paintings in the room, but Gringovitch's painting dominated the space. It was compelling.

Ben sat at the desk in the den and dialed his service in New York.

—Musician's Service. Please hold, said Hillary.

Ben waited for Hillary to pick up the line.

—Musician's Service, Ben Clarone's line, said Hillary.

—Hillary, it's me, Ben.

—Ben, where on earth are you?

—I'm in France. Nice to be exact. Can I speak to Heather?

—Why didn't you take me with you? whined Hillary.

—You said you had a new beau. You were so in love you were blind and deaf to me. I'm sure I asked you, said Ben.

—Ben, always the tease. I'll buzz Heather's line.

—What trouble are you in now? asked Heather with heavy sarcasm.

—I need numbers and addresses.

—Hold while I get your book.

Ben hoped somewhere in the record of his calls there was one from Gringovitch in Rome.

Heather must be busy; it took her a long time to get back on the line.

—Ben, I've got your book. It goes back only a year. It would take me longer to find your old books.

—Do you have a message from Anatoly Gringovitch from perhaps six or eight months ago?

—No, but I have one from yesterday, said Heather.

—Yesterday? He knows I'm in Nice.

—Easy, big guy. The message is: Call me in Rome as soon as possible. 76 00148.

—Italy's country code 39? asked Ben.

—Yes, Ben. You also have several calls from Hidenori Matusoka. He wants to know which bank to wire you your five million yen.

—Heather, you know I don't have a bank account, and I won't until I return to the states around Thanksgiving. Next time he calls, please tell him that.

—I will when he phones again. By the way, inquired Heather, how much is five million yen?

—About \$15,000.

—\$15,000! That's more than I make in a year! exclaimed Heather.

—Remember, dinner and a show when I return. You know I'll have the bread.

—You are such a come-on, Ben. Is there anything else I can do for you?

—Yes, but not over the phone.

—Ben, be nice.



—Heather, I know from the sound of your voice you're teasing me with your cleavage and short skirt. My phone is getting hot.

—Why aren't *you* getting hot, lover boy? Speaking of hot, Zoe's divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian, wants you to call him ASAP.

—Good luck on that. Anything else?

—Zoë called and said she would be in New York this week doing promos for *I'd Rather Not* and would like to meet you for a late lunch.

—I'd rather not, joked Ben. Better to go in the ring with a ravenous tiger than a pre-divorce lunch with Zoë

—Ah, Ben! You are soooo bad.

—Well, if you don't have any more good news, it's *ciao bello*. I'll call again in a few days. Keep out of trouble.

—Good-bye, handsome. Keep your nose clean and don't get robbed again.

It took Ben three tries to correctly dial Gringovitch's number in Rome.

—Pronto.

—Pronto. This is Ben Clarone. Is Anatoly there?

—Wadaminit.

What a kid, thought Ben, answers the phone in Italian, hears an American and immediately goes Brooklyn.

Gringovitch's Rome atelier had stone walls and he could hear many voices echoing around the room. Ben didn't know what they were doing, but it sounded like a big noisy family gathering or party.

—Anatoly, telephone for you, shouted the kid.

—Who is it?

—That musician guy, Clarone.

—Get his telephone number. Tell him I will call him back at eleven tonight.

—Anatoly will call you tonight at eleven. What is your number?

—Country code 33, 06 45 60 60 60. Please read that back to me. Click.

Ben looked at his watch, 7:30.

Ben poured himself another scotch and made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. After brushing his teeth, he took out his contrabass clarinet. There was a baby grand in the living room and a music stand. He took the music stand in the den and began practicing Hausenstockmann's *Constellations*.

After an hour, he had a dozen reeds on the desk in various stages of preparation. Reed shavings and dust littered the desktop and the floor. He had also made the adjustment needed to put the instrument back in top playing shape. It was the bane of woodwind players: the changing weather and altitudes of various locations. Pads swelled or shrank causing leaks and making squeaks. Ben couldn't abide squeaks. He had a reputation for never squeaking on contrabass clarinet. He hated it when keys clacked and rattled making the instrument sound like a mechanical monster. His years in the recording studio made him very sensitive to those sounds. There was nothing worse than having a producer calling you down for a noisy instrument. Frequently the fix was a squirt of precious whale oil. Ben had a quart he had purchased in the fifties and portioned out in one-ounce bottles. That was now gone, thanks to Zoë. The bottle in his contra case from the tour was all he had left. He would have to go to Iceland or Japan to replenish his supply. Sewing machine oil, which most repairmen used, was just not the same.

At exactly 11:00 the phone rang.

—Anatoly, I presume, said Ben.

—No, it's Arris.

—Ah, Arris. To what do I owe the pleasure? asked Ben.

—I've been informed that you are trying to screw me over again.

—What do you mean, screw you over? asked Ben.

—What were you doing at Découvrir Art today?

—Discovering art, what else would I be doing?

—Don't be a smart ass. What I did to you in Paris is minor compared to what my friends can do to you. You will wish you were dead, Clarone.

—And who says I was at Découvrir Art today? asked Ben.

—Informers.

—Really? And who might they be?

—Your friends.

—I hope you don't mean your girlfriend, Isabella Sanitizzare.

—Don't be a wise guy. Victor Taxi doesn't always drive a taxi.

Watch your back. Keep your nose clean. The next time there will be no warning.

Click.

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Inspector Lilly Rose let the phone ring six times. She hung up and dialed the number again. Victor Taxi answered on the second ring.

—This is Beagle.

—Clarone took a box to Découvrir Art in Marseilles today, said Victor. He returned to Nice with a painting that was not in a box.

Click.

—I had more to say, shouted Victor into the dead phone. I can't believe that bitch hung up on me

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Gabe Benjamin was drunk. He put his key in the lock. He could not open the door to his hotel room. He had just *locked* the door, not unlocked it. He immediately snapped alert. Something was wrong. He turned on the lights. Everything looked normal. He checked the bathroom. It was the same, except he had fresh towels. He checked the small armoire. The two painting boxes Roi de Quoi had made were missing!

He called reception.

—Oui, Monsieur Benjamin, said the clerk.

—Something is missing from my room.

—What may I ask?

—Two boxes.

—No one has entered the hotel except you since I've been at the desk.

—When did you go on duty?

—Eleven tonight.

—That was fifteen minutes ago.

—What was in the boxes? asked the clerk.

—Two paintings.

—You know we have a safe for valuables. We are not liable for valuables missing from your room. You agreed to that when you registered. You should file a report with management in the morning.

Gabe was stuck. If he reported the theft to the police, they would need to know what was in the boxes. In the right circumstances, art theft could involve INTERPOL. The two boxes were the dummies Roi de Quoi had made for just this eventuality.

—I will speak with management in the morning. In the meantime I will inform our lawyers in Hollywood that film company property has been stolen from your hotel.

—Are you certain that they are not there?

—Yes. You are welcome to look for yourself, replied Gabe.

—I can't leave my post. Security is our highest priority I suggest you wait until morning to speak with management, said the clerk.

—I'll do just that. Good night.

To be continued.

