Five Million Yen: Chapter 47

by Daniel Harris

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Dan Arris and Isabella Sanitizzare left Claudia Monschaud's memorial service and walked to a small nearby restaurant, Le Cocu. It was known as a place for lovers and gourmands.

Both were dressed in black. Isabella wore a black fascinator with a matching veil. Her black dress, tight sheath with a stylish short skirt outlined her feminine curves to advantage. She wore black patterned stockings with low-heeled shoes. Arris was dressed in a black business suit. Both knew Paris well enough to wear a scarf and carry an umbrella. Neither had an overcoat.

They ate in silence, except for an occasional remark on the quality of the meal.

—Would you like to view the dessert cart? asked the waiter.

—Perhaps a little later, Arris replied. We would like to finish the wine and wait a while before dessert.

—Very well, sir. I shall return later.

—Isabella, said Arris, I would like you to keep Claudia's ashes until I find an appropriate place for their dispersal or burial. As you know, Claudia's mother died when she was eighteen and her father, a war correspondent, was killed in Vietnam not long after. She has no family. The few distant relatives I contacted refused to come to Paris for the service.

—How sad, said Isabella, that a bright, personable and beautiful woman, who had many contacts, would have no friends here to say goodbye. No one showed from Pan Am, where she was a senior Stewardess, nor any classmates or neighbors.

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—Yes, I spent hours on the phone trying to locate her friends to no avail, lied Arris.

They both gave a wordless salute with their wine glass.

—Well, Dan, I think your eulogy was marvelous and touching, said Isabella. I could hardly believe a callous businessman like you could be so moving.

—Well, she was my wife, after all. I did love her, even though she tried to leave me and was having an affair with that musician Ben Clarone.

—I spotted several police at the service, interjected Isabella. Inspector Lilly Rose from Police judiciaire and Inspector Paumé from INTERPOL, both were conspicuous.

—Yes, said Arris, it is curious that they would attend this event, but they have their reasons.

—I recognized a few of your art clients, said Isabella. It was kind of them to attend.

—I can bet they were wondering if I had signed my collection over to Claudia. As you well know, many art dealers put the business side of the profession in a family member's name to protect them from suspicion of fraud.

—I run an ethical business, said Isabella. I have no need for such a *ruse de guerre*.

—I guess that's why you're known as the spider woman of the art business, cracked Arris.

—Be nice, Dan. It is a sad day and this is a splendid meal. Don't spoil it.

They sat engaged in their own thoughts for some time. Isabella quietly wept.

—Sorry for the tears, Dan, but it just hit me that I won't see Claudia again. We had such good times together.

—Take this, he said, producing a small package of tissues.

—Thank you, said Isabella sniffling.

The waiter discreetly poured the remainder of the wine and left.

When Isabella gained her composure, Arris signaled the waiter.

—You can show us the dessert cart and the cheese cart, if you will, directed Arris.

The two carts were pulled up to their table. The *pâtissier* himself presented the desserts and the *garçon de fromage* explained a bewildering array of cheeses.

Arris chose a selection of cheeses and Isabella chose a Brioche Perdu with lavender ice cream. Arris selected an expensive cognac and Viennese coffee for beverages.

—You should try some of this dessert, offered Isabella.

Arris put a small piece on his fork.

—Amazing. Would you like to taste this soft cheese? It explodes with the flavor.

—The meal was too rich for me to have cheese, said Isabella. I'll stick with this light confection.

When they had finished the dessert and cheese, Arris toasted Claudia with his cognac.

—To Claudia, may she rest in peace.

—Yes, to the beautiful and memorable Claudia. May she rest in peace, toasted Isabella.

Isabella worked hard not to weep. She was afraid Arris would think she was pulling a Sarah Bernhardt, or worse, showing weakness.

Isabella, said Arris after some time, I have asked you to watch Ben Clarone. I hold him responsible for my wife's death. The medical examiner told me Claudia was two months pregnant at the time of her death. We had not had sexual relations for at least three months. She must have had a dizzy spell and fell in the shower. I would like to extract some revenge on Clarone, nothing terminal, but enough to mess up his life.

—Are you sure she was pregnant? asked Isabella.

Arris demurred with a clearing of his throat.

Isabella took a sip of cognac. She looked Arris in the eye.

—Claudia's period started at my house the day before she died, said Isabella. Claudia was so furious that she got drunk. She told me, she wanted to make a reconciliation with you and save her

marriage. She wanted children. I think the authorities are baiting a trap, Arris. They are setting you up.

Arris's face didn't reveal any emotion.

—Of course you are correct, spider woman. Who better to know the wiles of the fox than the vixen herself?

—Let's cut to the chase, Dan. Why do you want me to watch Clarone? asked Isabella.

—I suspect he is double-crossing me.

—How can a bumbling musician like Clarone double-cross you, an experienced art dealer and international con artist?

Arris wished he had a cigar. He swallowed his remaining cognac in his glass in a gulp and signaled the waiter to bring another.

—Let me explain, Isabella. Gringovitch owns an Arshile Gorky painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*. The painting has an interesting provenance. In the spring of 1948, Gorky's wife, Mougouch, began an affair with the painter Roberto Matta. Gorky was suffering from numerous debilitating illnesses, colon cancer, paralysis of his painting arm from a car wreck, and the mental anguish of the loss of a significant body of his later paintings when his studio burned. The infidelity of his wife was the final straw that led to his suicide by hanging July 21, 1948. Sometime in June 1948, he painted the picture *The Unfaithful Wife*. After Gorky's suicide and before his works could be collected and cataloged, Matta, probably the day Gorky hung himself, stole the painting from Gorky's home. It may still have been wet from painting. *The Unfaithful Wife* was never entered into the complete catalogue of Gorky's paintings assembled a few months after his suicide.

—How does that relate to Gringovitch or Clarone?

—Hear me out. Matta eventually ditched Gorky's wife and moved to Italy. He took the painting with him.

—I still don't understand how Gringovitch could be involved in this, said Isabella.

Arris took a slow sip of cognac. Isabella drank her coffee in silence, brooding.

—Well, said Arris after a long pause, Anatoly Gringovitch has residences in several cities, Brooklyn, Rome, and Paris. He rented his 182 rue Charenton apartment in Paris to Celine Crisse, a former mistress of Roberto Matta. Crisse had stolen *The Unfaithful Wife* from Matta's Rome atelier as revenge for Matta's philandering.

She gave the painting, he continued, to Anatoly Gringovitch as payment for two years' rent. The painting is not listed in the Gorky *catalogue raisonné*, because Matta stole it from Gorky's home before the sheriff sealed the home and the inventory of paintings in his home could be made. It is virtually unknown. Art historians suspect it exists from some remarks made by his neighbors. But other than hearsay, and a sentence in a letter to his doctor, it is off the record.

—So, Gringovitch possesses this Gorky painting. How does Clarone figure into this?

—Not so fast, Isabella, there are many twists and turns

Arris wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood up.

—Please excuse me. I need to use the men's room. More when I return.

When Arris returned he ordered another round of coffees.

—So, I still don't understand how Clarone is involved in a Gorky painting, insisted Isabella.

—You are so impatient, Isabella. Look, Gringovitch needed cash to purchase his Rome studio. He has a long lease, but he was worried that the owner might sell the atelier and he would be evicted. He decided to sell the Gorky painting and buy his Rome atelier.

—So far it sounds like a straightforward plan, said Isabella.

—I put out feelers to prospective buyers. There were two interested buyers, both Armenian, like Gorky, and both with deep pockets. Gringovitch and I were wondering how we were going to transport a hot painting back to Europe. Along comes Clarone who by crazy circumstances is homeless and unemployed. He's been a friend of Gringovitch's since grade school in Chicago. He has a gig in Monte Carlo. So, Gringovitch says, “Why not have Clarone take

the paintings to Europe?” Against my better judgment, I agree to this arrangement.

—So far, I don't see a problem, said Isabella.

Arris sipped his coffee and patted his mouth with his napkin.

—No problem, continued Arris. Sounded like a good plan. Trusted friend takes two paintings to France.

—Wait, interrupted Isabella, *two* paintings?

—Yes, I failed to mention I made a copy of the Gorky painting, explained Arris — intentionally not mentioning that he had made two copies: One to be discovered in Yolande's restaurant in Nice as the gouache peeled away, the other to be sold to the lower of the two bidders in place of the Gorky original.

—So you were going to scam one of the buyers? asked Isabella.

—Not exactly, Isabella. As you know a copy is a copy; but a forgery has some small flaw so the forger, if no one else, can identify it as a forgery.

—Arris, didn't you go to jail for this kind of fraud? Isabella asked.

—Not exactly. I was literally making money. The KGB ratted me out to the CIA.

Arris gave Isabella a wink.

—OK, so Clarone has two paintings to deliver to Nice. But how did that work? asked Isabella.

I cut a 100-franc note into three parts, explained Arris, using customized pinking shears. At each delivery, the recipient would give Clarone one piece of the note. I mailed one part to Yolande and the other to Yousef Al Sidran. Clarone has his piece of the note that had a common side with the other missing two. If everything matched, Clarone would present the three-part note to an intermediary at a *bouquiniste* in Paris and buy a poster for one of his concerts, which he would take to the Ritz in Paris. He would present the poster to the reception desk and retrieve his musical instrument and half of his 20,000 franc delivery fee.

I would take his musical instrument to Paris. When he delivered the poster, he would receive his contrabass clarinet and half his fee, 10,000 francs.

—That all sounds like typical spycraft, said Isabella.

—Wait, Isabella, hear me out. Clarone arrives in Paris, continued Arris, with a complete three-piece 100-franc note. Except — and this is important — he never should have gotten the two parts of the 100-franc note because the contacts *never received* their part of the 100-franc note. BUT, said Arris raising his voice, the son of a bitch shows up in Paris with all three parts of the note perfectly matched. I leave for London. Claudia, in a panic, takes the contrabass clarinet and the envelope up to our room. When Clarone arrives, Claudia gives him his instrument and the full delivery fee of 20,000 francs. I'm not at the Ritz to stop her. She and Clarone are lovers, so she disobeys my orders and Clarone splits to Nice with his instrument and 20,000 francs.

—Something is not right, said Isabella.

—No shit, Sherlock. Not only that, but he had been boning my wife for who knows how long. His semen is in every orifice in her recently dead body according to the medical examiner.

Isabella could see that Arris was angry. His flushed face was changing to purple.

—I'm sure that's an exaggeration, said Isabella smiling.

—Probably, but the gist is correct, Arris retorted.

—Did you mean jis or gist? punned Isabella.

—Jis is the gist, said Arris working on the pun.

—If not a motive for murder, teased Isabella.

—You're not suggesting I murdered my wife, are you? asked Arris with heat.

—Wouldn't be the first time a woman was murdered for pecker tracks, laughed Isabella. I was only teasing you.

—I hope so. Yet there is always a grain of truth in teasing, but it is a side of the issue that hadn't occurred to me, said Arris.

—Jealous husband hadn't occurred to you? I'm surprised someone as careful as you hadn't thought of that, scolded Isabella. It's not like you. The police are inciting you, like Iago inflamed Othello with a handkerchief.

—You are as smart and clever as people say, said Arris visibly shaken.

—Continue with your explanation, said Isabella.

Arris gave Isabella a baleful eye.

—Gringovitch over-painted the Gorky original and my copy with gouache. We gave Clarone two paintings to take to Nice. They looked like Gringovitch paintings. If French customs opened the boxes, it was just a friend acting as a courier.

—Okay, that all sounds straightforward, said Isabella.

—There's a problem, added Arris. I hired a private investigator with instructions to steal the paintings from Clarone. The private dick discovers that the paintings are stashed in Gabe Benjamin's hotel room at Beau Rivage in Nice. He pinches the boxes from the hotel, but when the shamus opens the boxes, they contained cheap Sunday painter canvases. Not the paintings Gringovitch over-painted. So where is the Gorky original and my copy? What painting did Clarone deliver to Yousef Al-Sidran? Where is the painting he was supposed to deliver to Yolande Esquirinchi, whose restaurant, Chez Yolande, was blown up last week by Corsican Separatists?

—Now I think I understand your anger, said Isabella.

—Your mission, Isabella, spat Arris, is to get the answers, the sooner the better.

Isabella looked at Arris. Her first impression was that Clarone, or Clarone and Gringovitch, were double-crossing Arris. If that were the case, she knew, Clarone's life was in danger. Isabella was well aware Arris had connections that could make people disappear without a trace.

—I understand perfectly, replied Isabella. What's in it for me besides a night or two with Clarone?

—I told you Gringovitch would give you one or two paintings to sell, he reminded her.

—How do I know he'll agree? Why can't I have the forged Gorky?

—It's sold, said Arris.

—But you don't know where it is. How can it be sold? If I find it, I should keep it.

—That wouldn't be a good idea, warned Arris.

—You aren't threatening me are you? asked Isabella.

—Of course not, Isabella. We are partners. I will give you 10,000 francs for your immediate expenses, offered Arris.

—Keep that chump change. I'll agree to the Gringovitch paintings, said Isabella.

—You discover what Clarone is doing and I'll make sure you are well rewarded.

—Arris, you worry too much. Of course we're partners in this. I'm confident I can fill my part of the bargain.

For Isabella the prize had changed from a couple of Gringovitch paintings to a Gorky. She could make some serious cash from the Gorky. The Gringovitch paintings would enrich her purse, and maybe she could become his European dealer, but a genuine Gorky could be worth half a million or more. Her fifty per cent commission would be a quarter of a million dollars.

—I'm leaving for Japan tonight, said Arris. I'll be meeting Yousef Al-Sidran there. We then travel to China to prospect for business.

—I never heard any of this, said Isabella. But how do I contact you if you are in China?

—Leave a message at Découvrir Art. I will contact you, instructed Arris.

—Okay. Tomorrow morning I will retrieve Claudia's ashes. I have a beautiful Greek antique funeral urn in my office, which she liked. You did pay for the cremation?

—Of course, Isabella. What kind of cad do you think I am? The urn is your gift. I'm not paying your prices for a classical antique funeral urn, real or fake.

—By the way, Dan. How did you convince the police to let you cremate Claudia with her death still under investigation?

—*Mon Charme*, Mademoiselle Sanitizzare, my charm, of course.

To be continued.