

Five Million Yen: Chapter 49

by Daniel Harris

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Besotted by an overload of scotch, Ben's brain barely alerted him to loud knocking at his door. Instinctively, he reached for a pillow to mute the sound, but his hand grasped the castor of a desk chair. He lay collapsed on the floor of the den, not on the large bed in the master bedroom.

The knocking continued, now louder.

—Clarone, shouted a truculent male voice.

—One minute, replied Ben, struggling to gather knees under hips.

Using the desk as a support, he struggled to his feet and wobbled into the nearest bathroom. There he flipped on the light and aligned his head under the shower. Cold water blasted his face. He shook his head like a dog and towed off.

—Who is it? he asked, weaving toward the front door.

—Police.

—What do you want at this hour?

—Open the door. We have a warrant to search this residence.

Ben looked through the peephole and saw two uniformed gendarmes and Inspector Lilly Rose. He opened the door.

—Good morning, Monsieur Clarone, said Inspector Rose.

—Is it morning? asked Ben.

—1:30 a.m. exactly, said one of the gendarmes, consulting his wristwatch.

—We need to search your residence, said Inspector Rose.

Monsieur Dan Arris filed a complaint that you stole two paintings he entrusted to you for delivery to addresses in Nice and Marseilles.

Ben was startled and gave her a close look. He was not sober, yet more sober than he was a second before. The hair sprouting from the wart on Inspector Lilly Rose's nose multiplied into a coif of quills. Ben closed his bruised eye and the coif became a single black vibrissa.

—Dan Arris did *what*? shouted Ben.

—He filed a complaint that you stole two works of art belonging to his gallery.

—He's full of it, and he knows it, said Ben with heat. I gave him valid receipts for delivery of both paintings.

—Where are the paintings? demanded Inspector Rose.

—I delivered one to Yousef al-Sidran at Découvrir Art in Marseilles, explained Ben, the other is hanging on the wall in the den. Follow me.

He led them into the den. With a dramatic flourish, Ben pointed to the painting: *Abstract with Yellow*.

—I couldn't deliver this to Yolande's Restaurant because it had been, shall we say, compromised. I did find the letter Arris mailed from Brooklyn with the third of a 100-franc note, to be given to me as proof of delivery, stuffed in the damaged gate. I plan to put the painting in a bank vault this afternoon, as per Arris's instructions. I called the Brooklyn painter, Anatoly Gringovitch, now in Rome, to corroborate these instructions. You can check the phone records of this very phone, said Ben pointing to the phone on the desk.

—According to Arris, it is his property, said Inspector Lilly Rose.

—That's not true, said Ben raising his voice. It belongs to my good friend Gringovitch, the painter of this painting. At the moment, he is in Rome and will be here in two weeks to attend my world premiere performance of Hausenstockman's new composition, *Constellations*, with the Monte Carlo Orchestra.

—We know too much about your big music reputation, Clarone, said the smaller of the two gendarmes.

Ben scowled at the gendarme.

—Monsieur Clarone, said Lilly Rose, your accomplice, Dan Arris, is wanted for destroying evidence in a capital case, bribery and possibly more serious charges.

He is a fugitive at this point.

—What's that got to do with me?

—You could be an accessory, piped up the bigger gendarme.

—An accessory to what? demanded Ben.

—Conspiracy to commit murder, replied Lilly Rose.

—Murder? said Ben, blanching.

—And trafficking in stolen art, added Lilly Rose.

Ben was incredulous. He looked at the three police officers, shook his head and said: This can't be.

—What stolen art? My friend Gringovitch asked me to bring two paintings to Nice and deliver them to two addresses. I could only deliver one. The other is here in this den. I was going to put it in a bank vault this afternoon. Arris is assuming an authority over me he does not have. His only role was to hold my contrabass clarinet against the safe delivery of the two paintings. I followed his directions exactly and he gave me my instrument and fee ... proof that I satisfactorily performed my mission.

—Very interesting, Clarone, said Lilly Rose. Arris claims you and his wife, Claudia Monschaud, conspired to swindle the paintings and 20,000 francs from him. Further, he claims that you fenced the paintings and that Claudia was the go-between. His attack on you in the taxi occurred because he knew you and Claudia were double-crossing him, not because you were his wife's lover.

—Claudia was a fully alive woman when I left her suite at the Ritz. The bellman can testify to that and so can Inspector Paumé. How the hell can I be an accessory to *murder*?

No one answered Ben's question.

—What is your schedule today? demanded Inspector Rose.

—I have a rehearsal from 10 to noon in Monte Carlo. Then, I deposit the painting in a bank vault this afternoon, as I've stated before. I have no other plans.

—Excuse us one moment, please, Monsieur Clarone, said Rose motioning the two gendarmes out of the room. Stay here, Clarone, ordered Inspector Rose.

The three police officers stepped into the front foyer to confer among themselves. Ben could hear a lively discussion and the squawk of the police radio as it switched between transmit and receive. The smaller gendarme and Inspector Rose returned after a few minutes.

—This is what I'm going to do, explained Rose. I am going to put you under 24-hour surveillance. There will be a police officer watching your residence and following you wherever you go. Unless required for your employment with the Monte Carlo Orchestra, you are to restrict your travel to Nice and Monaco. I would suggest a quiet weekend at home.

—How long is this in effect? asked Ben.

—Until Monday. I am concerned that Arris, or one of his confederates, will try to harm you. You will deposit the painting in the Crédit Agricole branch on Avenue Jean Medecin tomorrow afternoon.

—What should I do if Arris contacts me?

Inspector Rose looked at the gendarme.

—We will know, replied Rose. Clarone, you can thank Detective Harold Smith for saving you from the stinking misery of a French jail cell. Our concern is that Arris was supposed to be on a JAL flight to Tokyo last night. Someone tipped him off that we were waiting for him. He is at-large and a possible danger to you.

—Sounds like I am being used as bait, said Ben.

—If he finds you, remember, beef steak for a black eye, offered the gendarme.

—I have complete faith in the French government to protect me, replied Ben. Horsemeat works faster, officer, said Ben not missing a beat..

—Clarone, I'm impressed you know that little French joke, said the gendarme with a chuckle. But, just now, Monsieur contrabass

clarinet *extraordinaire*, you look like you need some sobering up and sleep.

—You are correct, said Ben. You should know that Victor Taxi has been tailing me since I arrived in France. I hope *your* men are better skilled. He sticks out like a carnival barker

Inspector Rose and the gendarme unsuccessfully tried to suppress a grin.

—When you are ready to take the painting to the bank, explained Inspector Rose, wrap it well and have the police officer, parked across the street, drive you to the bank. He will stay with you until the picture is secure in the vault. The bank will be expecting you. You will deposit it into the account *we* have created for you.

—Yes, Inspector, I understand.

Ben escorted his visitors to the front door.

—By the way, Clarone, asked Inspector Rose, what medium did Gringovitch use for the painting in the den?

—Acrylic, replied Ben.

—Strange, said Inspector Rose, I thought Arris said they were gouache.

—That painting is acrylic, Inspector, insisted Ben.

—Yes. Well, you look tired. Get some sleep.

—Yes, Madame Inspector.

Ben locked the door, stripped down and set two alarm clocks for 8 a.m. As soon as he hit the big bed, he was deep under.

Ben woke 30 seconds before the alarms went off. He had a headache and a bad case of cottonmouth. He stepped out of the shower to the sound of a buzzer.

—Who the hell is that? he asked himself.

Wrapping a towel around his waist, he padded toward the front door. The door swung open and there was a middle-aged French woman wearing a tattered trench coat over her housecoat.

—Bonjour, she said cheerfully. I am the housekeeper. My name is Françoise.

—I'm Benjamin Clarone, replied Ben flustered to be greeting a strange older woman while he was swaddled in a bath towel. Please excuse me, I just stepped out of the shower.

—Mr. Clarone, I read about you in this morning's paper. You are the American virtuoso?

—*Oui*. The newspaper did not quite have the story correct. I will dress and leave as soon as possible.

—Do not hurry, Monsieur Clarone. I will begin laundering the bedding. You have only slept in the master suite?

—Yes. I have a few clothes to launder.

—Leave them all in the hamper in the master's bathroom.

—Thank you

Ben dressed quickly. He went into the kitchen and drank two large glasses of water. Françoise watched him closely.

—I will make some coffee, she said. Would you like some?

—Coffee would be most appreciated. Thank you, Françoise.

Ben went into the den where he saw the remains of the scotch bottle and a half filled tumbler. He brought them into the kitchen. He rinsed out the tumbler and filled it with water. Françoise was making coffee.

—Coffee is exactly what I need, said Ben looking in the refrigerator for a breakfast snack. There was a box of biscotti. He put it on the counter.

Back in the den, Ben put four reeds to soak in the tumbler and assembled his contrabass. When the reeds were ready, he began a warm-up of scales, arpeggios and intervals, first slowly and finally presto.

—That's enough, said Ben out loud. He remembered he would be performing at Bar Oiseaux Érotique with Luc Martino that Sunday night. He and Luc had a long-standing French-English joke with the French word for egg, *un oeuf*, which sounds like “enough” in English. For the two of them, when something was enough, they would say: it's an egg, when speaking French, or “*un oeuf*” when speaking English. Ben tried to remember the name for wordplay like that.

Ben carefully swabbed out his contrabass and put it back into its case. Françoise brought a tray with coffee and some biscotti into the den.

—Pour monsieur.

—Merci, merci bien, Madame.

—What is that instrument you were playing? asked Françoise.

—La clarinette contrabasse.

—O, la,la. A singing elephant, tittered Françoise.

—*Oui*, Madame. It is not to everyone's taste.

Ben bolted his coffee and two biscotti.

—You must eat slower, Monsieur Clarone, scolded Françoise.

—I have not time. I am late. The traffic into Monaco will be terrible, complained Ben.

—Take the Grande Corniche, it is longer, but faster, instructed Françoise. I work in Monte Carlo two days a week.

—Thank you for the advice. I must go.

The drive to Monaco was beautiful on the Grande Corniche. Ben remembered that the end of the Paris-Nice bicycle race ended with a time trial up the Grand Corniche to Col d'Eze. Ben's younger brother was always wishing he could try his legs on that Grand Corniche time-trial.

Ben arrived at the rehearsal at exactly 9:30 a.m. He dreaded the reception he would receive at the rehearsal. When he walked into the rehearsal, he heard groups of instruments practicing sections of *Constellations*. In this lavish piece, Hausenstockman divided the orchestra into homogeneous groups by timbre and range. It was not the usual orchestral seating arrangement, but eight groups of players spaced about the stage and into the balconies of the concert hall

—Bonjour, Monsieur Clarone! greeted Maestro Marcevicz.

—Homophones! That's the word I was thinking of. Words that sound the same, but don't have the same meaning in the same or different languages like enough, un oeuf.

—Homophones?

—Pardon me, Maestro. I've been searching for that word all morning. Good morning to you.

—Clarone, I believe we have diffused most of the rancor in the orchestra. A few players were cycled out for younger players and most of the troublemakers have been warned. They also appreciate the extra pay they will be receiving for the two additional rehearsals. My advice is to lead by example. No more speeches, please.

—You are correct, Maestro. Thank you for your good counsel and for rallying the orchestra.

After the rehearsal, several members of the orchestra approached Ben. They apologized for the orchestra's bad behavior and were complimentary of Ben's virtuosity.

—Ben, you are still amazing, said Clovis, giving him a big hug. Did you get the message about a picnic at our house?

—Yes, I did. I would like to, but maybe next weekend? I have guests for this weekend and I don't know their plans or expectations. I will call you tomorrow when I know more.

—Lunch? I know a good restaurant near here. Good food and not expensive.

—Sure, replied Ben.

—We, the orchestra, have a special rehearsal this afternoon. You are free.

—It's a good thing for me. I have to do some banking. I've been on the road for almost four months.

The lunch was just right, tasty and reasonably priced. There was enough time afterward for Clovis to return to the orchestra rehearsal. Ben was able to arrive back in Nice with time to spare for his banking.

When Ben walked up to his apartment building, he saw the expected police vehicle with an officer sitting behind the wheel. He crossed the street. The officer rolled down the window.

—Bonjour, monsieur, Ben greeted the officer. Beautiful weather.

—Bonjour, Clarone. My name is LaPonti. Giles LaPonti. *Oui*, another perfect November day in Nice.

—Yes, well, I will be packaging the painting and going to the bank as soon as I can.

—I shall be waiting, replied officer LePonti.

Ben crossed over and entered his building. Five floors schlepping the contrabass was a chore. When he arrived at his flat, he found it immaculate. Françoise had purchased flowers and the flat smelled clean and fresh. His clothes, now washed and ironed, were laid neatly on the big bed, which had fresh linen.

Ben wrapped *Abstract With Yellow* in some brown paper and packing tape he found in the maid's closet. After checking that he had his full Benjamin Clarone ID's, he locked the door and descended to the street.

LaPonti exited the car and opened the trunk. He took out two signs on stands which read: **NO PARKING by POLICE ORDER.**

—Put the painting in here, ordered LaPonti.

—Yes, sir.

LaPonti pulled the car out of the parking spot, got out and placed the two

signs in the vacated spot.

Ben could not follow the route that LaPonti took to Crédit Agricole, but they arrived at a side street near the bank. LaPonti double-parked.

—Clarone, you take care of your business. I have to use the toilette, said LaPonti as they entered the bank. I'll meet you when you have finished your business.

—I need a vault for a month, said Ben to the bank officer to whom he was directed by the information clerk.

—Are you storing that package? asked the clerk.

—Yes, and perhaps another one.

—Do you have an account with us?

—Not at this time, replied Ben.

—First you must open an account. How much do you wish to deposit?

—10,000 francs, replied Ben.

—The vault fee will be 1000 francs for the month. Do you want me to deduct that from your deposit, or do you wish to pay it another way?

—Deduct it.

After Ben opened an account and deposited the painting in his vault, he pocketed the key in his wallet's secret compartment and looked for LaPonti. LaPonti was not in the bank lobby.

Ben left the bank and looked for LaPonti's car. It was parked around the corner, but LaPonti was not in it. Ben went back into the bank. LaPonti was not to be seen.

He would have been in the bathroom a full half-hour, thought Ben, much too long. LaPonti entered the bank. He was eating a falafel and spilling some of the filling on the bank floor.

—Can't take some people to a nice place, thought Ben.

—Are you done here, Clarone? he asked.

—Yes, sir. I think I'd like to walk home. Maybe sit by the sea. Is that okay?

—Sure. But first I must take you home. Those are orders. My shift is over in a half hour, so the next officer will follow you wherever your little heart desires. My son is playing a football match for his school team at 5 p.m.

—Thank you. I can live with that.

—What do you call football in America?

—Soccer, answered Ben.

—A strange name. What you call football, the players use their hands on the ball. Here, football is all feet, except for the goalie. I guess that's why you call football soccer.

—It is confusing and doesn't make much sense. Americans don't have a good grip on language like the French.

—There is no philosophy behind English. French has strong philosophical roots.

—You are correct about that, said Ben with a sarcastic grin.

When they pulled up in front of Ben's building, Victor Taxi was parked in the spot LaPonti had saved.

—*Bâtard, merde!* exclaimed LaPonti slamming his palm on the steering wheel.

—You know him? asked Ben.

—A worm. Victor works for gangsters and the police, said LaPonti his voice rising.

—He's been on my ass since I arrived a week ago, said Ben.

—He has?

—Yes, sir, big time.

LaPonti yelled orders in his radio. Within minutes, a flatbed tow truck lifted Victor's car out of the spot and onto the flatbed. The truck had turned the corner at the end of the block when Victor bolted out of Ben's building.

Ben was astounded how fast LaPonti exited the car, chased down Victor, put him in a hammerlock and cuffed him. As he walked him back to the police car, LaPonti was talking on his radio and pushing a resisting Victor down the street. LaPonti slapped Victor's ear with his open hand. Victor bent over in pain and stopped talking. Such a blow could break a man's eardrum.

—Clarone, get out of the car! ordered LaPonti.

Ben left the car, LaPonti shoved Victor into the back seat.

—Wait for more officers to arrive, Clarone. They will accompany you to your flat. Something might have happened there.

Three gendarmes and two firemen accompanied Ben up to his flat. The door was closed but not locked.

—You wait here, Clarone, said the commanding officer.

Ben waited in the hallway. He could hear children talking excitedly on the lower stairway. Finally, one of the officers told him to come in.

—Don't touch anything, ordered the officer.

They led him to the den. Ben's contrabass clarinet case was open and empty.

—What the fuck! I told you cops that that motherfucker Victor was tailing me and trying to mess with me.

—Easy, Mr. Clarone, said the commander.

The fireman walked into the den with a long face.

—I think you better come with me, he said.

They walked into the kitchen. The window over the sink was open. One of the firemen was squatted on the top of the counter looking out the window.

—There it is, he said, pointing into the rear court.

—Let's go down there, said the fire commander

Ben charged down the stairs two at a time. There was a fire door at the end of the hallway. Ben burst through it. There on the concrete pavers were the four main parts of his contrabass with the keys mangled. He looked for his mouthpiece. He didn't find it. Perhaps it was still in the case. He was sick to death, nauseous from shock.

In a rage, Ben threw a heavy patio chair against the back wall of the building.

—Damn it. God damn it to hell! he screamed. My precious one-of-a-kind instrument, my life! Let me at that bastard, I'll rip his lungs out!

The police commander put his hand on Ben's shoulder. Ben broke down.

To be continued.

