

Five Million Yen: Chapter 5

by Daniel Harris

The story so far:

Chapter 1: Ben Clarone, a musician, has just arrived home in New York City after an exhausting three month world tour. He has little cash and a check for five million yen. Things are not as he expects.

Chapter 2: After securing his horns, he finds himself in an uptown flop where all is not as it seems. After being robbed he sits in his room and ruminates on his life.

Chapter 3: Ben experiences existentialism first hand and reviews the sordid selfish path of his life.

Chapter 4: A junky and a rat reveal themselves.

Ben was getting seriously hungry. Not enough to be weak, but enough to sharpen his mind and put him in hunt mode. Amazing how an empty gut sharpens the mind.

Ben closed and locked the door to his room.

He walked to the back of the hall. The stairway door was closed but not locked. He descended down to the sixth floor. He opened the door. He started from the smell. Man smells, vomit, piss, farts, fatty food, dirty armpits, whiskey breath and cheap deodorant.

-Christ.

Ben walked down the hall. Most of the doors were open an inch or two as if to invite someone to enter. Every room had a radio or TV on at a low level. Through one door he saw a Conn big bell tenor. That must be the *Green Dolphin Street* guy.

-Anyone home?

-Who's asking'?

-A neighbor. Nice *Green Dolphin Street* last night.

-How would you know?

-I've played it a few times and recorded it once.

-Where are your clothes? he said opening the door.

-Stolen.

-You are up in 7D?

-Yes.

-Sucker, that's the scam room. Rodney put you in that room?

-Is that his name? I call him Adonis.

-Same guy.

-I guess that's why you're wearing a sheet.

-You got it.

His host was a guy in his sixties with a full head of grey hair. He was missing a leg.

-You a vet?

-Yeah. I lost the leg in Iwo Jima. Took my balls also. Been living here since 1949.

-Sorry man.

-I'm over it. I repair radios and TV's over on Broadway for a nice Jewish guy. Saturday nights I drink and play the tenor. Not as good as I use to be.

-Few of us are.

-Mind if I try your tenor?

-No, but don't play too loudly, it's Sunday evening.

Ben picked up the tenor, slipped the neck strap over his head. The reed looked new. Always risky when you picked up a strange horn, you could end up squeaking and sounding like a fool. The mouthpiece looked and smelled clean.

-Nice Berg Larsen mouthpiece.

A few toots on open c-sharp and then he ripped a chromatic scale down to low B-flat in a perfect decrescendo.

-Horn could use some leaks fixed.

Then he started in on *Green Dolphin Street*. After the first time through the tune, he started his best Sonny Rollins impression. It was like a drug. He kept playing chorus after chorus returning to the tune every third chorus. Then he took the tune out to Ben

Clarone land. The horn was beautiful, if leaky. His fingers flew over the keys.

-Turn that fucking stereo down you asshole, some one shouted.

Ben took it up to the altissimo register and then ended up playing the verse in a breathy sub-tone.

-Nice horn, Ben said putting it back in the corner.

There were about five people standing in the doorway. They started to applaud.

-Thanks my friends. I play for clothing and food. All donations accepted.

A great silence descended.

-Man, you should take this horn over to Sal on 48th street. He can fix this up so you can play like a pro. It's a shame to let it fall apart.

-Gelt my friend. I don't have money for that.

-Well, if I had money, I spot you the money, or swap one of my tenors for this one. It's a great horn. Made Pres famous, or rather Pres made it famous.

-Yeah, I bought it new before I went in the Marines. My lieutenant saved it all through the war after I was wounded. He brought it to Great Lakes Veterans Hospital and gave it to me when he found out where they had stashed me.

He was a real officer and gentleman. They killed him in Korea.

-Sorry to hear that. Sounds like a true friend.

-Not a friend so much as a fatherly gentleman.

Ben didn't know what to say, so he thought it best to leave. Never knew with these types if they would breakdown and start weeping.

-By they way my name is Ben. Ben Clarone.

-Ben Clarone. Haven't I heard of you?

-You might have. What's your name?

-David Seltzer. That's not my real family name, but my father sold seltzer in Brooklyn from a wagon. So he took that for a last name. Delivered it to your house once a week. All flavors. Just like the old milkman. Our real family name is Skwierawscwicz, an unpronounceable Polish name.

-I hate to ask you this David, but do you think you could loan me some money or clothes? I can pay you back tomorrow when I get to my bank

-I can't loan money, but I can make you some soup and bread.

-That would be great. I haven't eaten since I was on the plane Saturday afternoon.

-I have plenty of right shoes, but most of the left ones are gone. I buy shoes with a friend who is my shoe size and only has a left leg. I might have an old pair of slippers and some worn out slacks.

David rolled his chair over to a flimsy cardboard armoire. He produced a pair of pants and slippers. The right slipper was brand new. The left had a hole in the sole.

David rolled his chair over to a bookcase, which served as a pantry. He took a can of Campbell's tomato soup and started preparing it in a pan on his hot plate. He cut up a small onion and garlic clove and put them in the soup. He opened a tin of Underwood's Deviled Ham and dumped it into the soup.

-Sorry it's not kosher. He chuckled.

-Good food for goyim sax player.

Ben's nose was telling his stomach that good things were coming.

When the soup was hot, David poured it into two mugs. He produced black pumpernickel bread and tore off a chunk, which he gave to Ben. The men ate in silence.

-David you have no idea how good that tasted. That was a feast.

-I can imagine a young guy like you needing a lot more. I can split an inch of a Snicker's bar with you for dessert.

-I can't take that from you David. You save it for later. You have done more than enough for me.

-Ha, ha. For later.

-What's funny?

-Well I worked as a busboy up in Kutcher's Country Club to get money to buy this horn. The old maid Jewish Brooklyn schoolteachers use to hoard food at each meal and say it was "falahter." Celia, don't forget your falahters." Of course us young

guys thought falahter was a schoolteacher code word for fellatsio.

Like, I falahted the bus boy.

-Ben gave a small chuckle.

There was a tap on the door.

-David, I brought a shirt for your guest.

-Hello, I'm David's neighbor, Carl. I thought you might like a shirt and I haven't worn this in years. It might be a little musty, but it will make you decent.

-Why thank you Carl.

David modeled his new old pants and shirt with the new and old slippers.

-You're almost a swell, Ben.

They all laughed.

-David I'm serious about the tenor. When I get out of this mess I'll take your horn down to Sal and get it fixed up.

Carl and David looked at the floor knowing that that would probably never happen.

Now all I need is some token money and I'll be on my way back to fame and fortune. Thank you David and Carl for all your help. Isn't it funny how the poor help each other? The rich could give a shit.

-You got that right, brother.

-If you want to go out, Simon, the old guy at the desk late nights, has a big collection of umbrellas. He takes the broken ones out of the trash cans on the street and fixes them. I'm sure he'll loan, or give you one. He's grumpy, but has a heart of gold.

-Well, I could use some gold, or even a dollar for tokens and phone calls. It all will come. Maybe it won't be raining tomorrow.

-I dunno Ben. These three-day nor'easters in New York usually last three days.

Ben left and headed for his room.

-Carl, do you know who that guy is? Ben Clarone. He's one of the top musicians in New York. I wonder what happened to him that he ended up here. I think his wife is the pretty actress woman on the side of the bus. You know the star of "I'd Rather Not."

-He must be on smack. That's why most of the new people live here. I'm surprised he got hornswoggled by Rodney.

-Didn't seem strung out.

-Who knows. I gotta catch my shows.

-Later Carl.

Ben had a funny feeling when he arrived at his room. He listened intently outside the door. No sounds. He put the key in the lock and turned it as quietly as he could, but it made a big click when the bolt finally shot. The light was off. He thought he remembered the light being on. He switched on the light.

The room looked the same except his backpack was on the floor next to the bed. Ben walked over looked more closely. The pack was clean and it was full of cleaned and folded clothes. His clothes.

-This is strange.

He carefully unpacked the bag: Shirts, socks, pants, underwear and even his Aidas running shoes and windbreaker. No tux. In the top flap he found his wallet. It was completely empty except for one subway token. No ID's, no passport, no credit cards, no driver's license, and no money. He checked all the pockets. A faded Indonesian postage stamp was stuck to the inside of the pocket where he used to keep stamps, coins, notebook, pens & pencils. It was his mobile stationary pocket. He loved that pun.

-I must have gotten to Adonis. But I need to find the contents of my wallet.

-Well, now I can go out in the world. Tomorrow the bank, my service and maybe find where Zoë is living these days.

He changed into familiar clothes. He gathered up the slippers, the pants and the shirt and headed back down to the sixth floor.

David's door was closed. He knocked. No answer. He tried Carl's door. Same story. He noticed all the doors were closed and he didn't hear any radios or TV's.

-Well tomorrow then. It seemed strange that all these lonely men would not have their radios or TV's on. Sunday night was prime time.

Ben went back up to his room. The door was locked and the light on, just as he had left it. His clothes were still there. He took the boxer shorts back to the shower room, used the bathroom and came back to his room. It seemed like there was a break in the rain.

There was a timid knock on his door.

-He looked through the peephole. He couldn't see anyone.

Carefully he cracked the door.

-Let me in please.

It was Rita.

-What's going on?

Rita slipped into his room fast like a roach.

-I'm in big trouble and so are you.

-Whoa, what do you mean I'm in big trouble?

To be continued.

