

Five Million Yen: Chapter 50

by Daniel Harris

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Ben wept. He sat on a metal patio chair, knees apart, elbows resting on his thighs, head supported by his hands. The gloved hand of the police commander rested on Ben's shoulder. Foggy rain from the sea slanted into the Italianate courtyard. Ben's head and shoulders did not move, his weeping was inaudible, invisible. The police commander could tell he was suffering.

—You should go inside, said the policeman.

Ben did not respond, but sat staring lizard-eyed at the shattered remains of his glorious musical instrument.

His musical voice was silenced. His reputation was in jeopardy. For three months he had suffered the stresses and trials of the road, always holding up the highest standards of musical performance, despite the challenges of the road: inclement weather, harsh travel, ill health, difficult people, and failing technology. Add to all that, Zoë Bontemps, his wife, had betrayed him, selling or hocking his livelihood. And then, friends and colleagues had abandoned him, accusing him of treacheries that were foreign to his ethics and morals. And, police on two continents took him for a swindler, art thief, conman, or bumbling ingénue. His means to fame and fortune lay ruined at his feet in a rainy Provençal courtyard.

Ben had found no sanctuary on this foreign shore. A miasma of jealousy, duplicity and venality had followed him since his arrival in Nice. The police could not protect him from the attacks on his property. When you think you have reached the bottom, wrote Charles Bukowski, one of Ben's favorite authors, there is always

another lower rung. Ben had reached that lower rung. Now the string of injustices had to be countered with action, not contrition.

The two firemen, who had followed Ben and the police officer to the courtyard, gently gathered up the mangled parts of Ben's contrabass clarinet.

—Monsieur Clarone, said the police commander, let's go inside. Officer LaPonti has questions for you and you will need to assess the damage to your instrument for us.

Ben couldn't tell them the extent of the damage. It wasn't only the physical damage to his musical instrument that devastated him, it was the accumulation of evil plotting and repeated daily vexations that stretched back months. His star was now eclipsed by catastrophe. This Second Empire mansion in Nice was as beastly unlucky as Villa Arson, or the Artists' Studios SRO in Manhattan two weeks ago.

The police commander took his hand off of Ben's shoulder put it under Ben's arm and assisting him from the chair, he then guided Ben past curious residents and up the stairs to his apartment.

—So, Monsieur Clarone, said LaPonti as Ben seated himself at the desk in the den, do you know how many people have keys to this apartment?

—Well, answered Ben, there's the owners, Isabella Sanitizzare who acts as the owners' art dealer, the housekeeper, and myself. There might be others, perhaps the children of the owners, but I don't know the family. There are, or were, three other sets of keys in the kitchen on a pegboard. Why do you ask?

—Whoever entered your apartment had a key, said LaPonti. There was no forced entry. Victor Taxi swears the door was unlocked when he arrived.

—Taxi could be lying, or someone gave him a key, said Ben.

—He didn't have a key and our men searched the hallway and grounds, said the police commander.

—Do you know the housekeepers name? asked LaPonti.

—Françoise, replied Ben. Isabella might know her full name.

Ben looked at the mangled parts of his contrabass. The damage was mostly bent keys. If he could find a skilled repairman, he could have his instrument repaired enough to play the gig on Sunday night with Lezardino and also Monday's rehearsal with the orchestra. If he were lucky, he could go to Paris on Tuesday and have Selmer, the manufacturer of his instrument, replace the damaged key work. He could return with it from Paris for Wednesday afternoon's orchestra rehearsal in Monte Carlo.

—Victor Taxi, continued LaPonti, says he was here to see you about retrieving a painting for Dan Arris, the international art dealer. He said you brought it from New York City.

—Victor Taxi is not to be trusted, scoffed Ben. Arris *never* instructed me to give a painting to Victor Taxi.

—Victor Taxi says your instrument was not in its case when he arrived. He says that he didn't see the painting and that he left when he saw what someone had thrown your instrument out the kitchen window.

—Victor Taxi is a pathological liar, said Ben, as you yourself have said. He can't be trusted with telling the truth. He wears whatever hat serves his purpose. If he is working for Dan Arris *and* the police, he is a double agent. Arris has a history of walking both sides of the street, as does Victor Taxi. I wouldn't trust either one of those grifters, nor should you, Officer LaPonti

Officer LaPonti gave Ben a sharp look for revealing a confidence.

—Give me fifteen minutes alone with that bastard, and I'll get the truth, said Ben.

—Easy, Monsieur Clarone, the French government doesn't condone personal vendettas.

—Maybe your government should, said Ben. I trusted the French government to protect my properties and person. Look at my one-of-a-kind contrabass clarinet in ruins. That's protection? Come on LaPonti, get real.

—Your engagement is with the Principality of Monaco, not the Republic of France.

—But I'm residing *in* the Republic of France, said Ben.

—Monsieur Clarone, let me remind you that you entered France as Benjamin Adoyan. We have protected Monsieur Adoyan perfectly. All Adoyan's belongings he had on arrival are safe. Ben Clarone is not in the Republic of France or the Principality of Monaco, no matter what the posters advertise.

—Touché, Officer LaPonti. You are correct, agreed Ben. I owe you an apology.

They heard an altercation in the hallway.

—Sounds like the yapping dogs of the press, announced LaPonti. Do you want to speak to them, Clarone?

—No. I want them *out*. Anything I say will be used against me. They blame me for the recent turmoil in the orchestra.

—We will have them removed, said LaPonti. My advice for you Clarone, is to stay inside. These reporters will chase you to the ends of the earth if you leave this flat. We cannot protect you from them.

—Understood.

—I think we have everything we need from you, Monsieur Clarone, said LaPonti. We wish you a good evening. We must require that you not leave Nice except for your obligations in Monte Carlo.

—May I go to Aspremont to have Pascal LeRoi work on my instrument? asked Ben.

—Yes, but don't stray any further. We will be watching you, as will the jackals of the press.

—I hope watching me also means protecting me, said Ben.

—That is not part of the deal, as you have discovered, said LaPonti turning to leave.

The police left and Ben locked the door. He went into the kitchen and poured a tumbler of Scotch. In the den, he telephoned Roi de Quoi.

—Allo? said a female voice. It was Gisela, Roi de Quoi's Austrian wife.

—This is Ben Clarone. I would like to speak with Pascal.

—Ben, this is Gisela, Pascal's wife, she answered in perfect English.

Ben knew she had been a world-class skier and was now the secretary of the international skiing governing body. She spoke most European languages and Japanese.

—Ah, you must be the beauty everyone raves about, said Ben, sliding gracefully into his usual persona.

—I think Pascal has been brainwashing you, she answered. Pascal is at the opera. He should be home around midnight. Can *I* help you?

—There has been a terrible accident with my musical instrument. I was hoping that Pascal could fix it for me tonight or tomorrow. I have a gig on Sunday night and a rehearsal on Monday morning.

—Hmm, I see. I shall call him immediately at the opera. Perhaps he can stop at your residence and take the instrument to his atelier. He can call you when he has a free moment.

—That would be perfect, said Ben.

—Are you coming to our beautiful historic home for a picnic?

—Maybe next weekend. I have a very tight schedule. I would love to see you, your family and, of course, your estate.

—I think estate is overstating the case, said Gisela, but it is *un petit château*.

—I can't wait to get a full tour, said Ben.

—Okay, let's plan for next weekend. I'll call Pascal now. He should call you soon.

—Thank you so much, Gisela. My rare and unique instrument is ruined. Bandits threw it out a window. It is destroyed.

—*Mon Dieu*, how awful. I'm sure Pascal can fix it for you. He has special gifts.

—I'm depending on him. Thank you Gisela.

Ben hung up and refilled his drink. The phone rang.

—Allo? said Ben.

—This is Pascal. Ben, what's up?

—I need your assistance again. Some bandits broke into my lodgings and threw my contrabass clarinet out the window. The keys are mangled. Can you do fine metal work?

—I might be able to help you. When do you need your instrument?

—No later than Sunday evening. I have a gig at Bar Oiseaux Érotique on Sunday night and a rehearsal with the Monte Carlo Orchestra on Monday morning. If we can make it work well enough to get through those two engagements, I can take it to Paris on Tuesday and have the factory refurbish it. If not, I will have to borrow or rent an inferior instrument.

—I will be here at the opera until eleven tonight. I will stop by your atelier at Villa Arson and pick-up the instrument on my way home.

—I don't live at Villa Arson anymore. I'm at a private residence not far from the train station: 17 rue de Paris, top floor.

—I know the street. I will meet you there after eleven.

—See you then. Many thanks, Pascal.

Ben no sooner hung up than the phone rang.

—Allo?

—Ben, this is Isabella. I've just arrived home. Have you had dinner?

—No, I haven't, but I have to stay close to home. There has been a crisis.

—What happened? asked Isabella.

—Some bandits threw my contrabass clarinet out the kitchen window of the apartment. It is destroyed. A repairman is coming here later tonight to assess the damage. The police have this place under surveillance, and the press is waiting for me downstairs. I should stay right here.

—Do you have any food to eat? asked Isabella in a concerned voice. I know you men don't always know how to cook.

—I'm a terrific cook. You may remember we moved bags of groceries here when I left Villa Arson. I was going to make pasta tonight.

—Why don't I bring over a bottle of Chianti and we can dine together, said Isabella

Ben thought about all the consequences of having Isabella at his home, not the least being that Monique was arriving tomorrow

morning. Also, he was wary of the sudden interest Isabella was showing him. Only after Claudia's death did she stop being bitchy and become more friendly and open. She was probably Dan Arris's new honey trap.

—Some other night, said Ben. The police won't let anyone into my apartment. It is still a crime scene. Some other time, perhaps?

—Absolutely. I am excited to see the Gringovitch paintings and to become better acquainted.

—Soon, Isabella, soon. My weekend has been ruined and I have much to do until the orchestra rehearsal on Monday morning.

—If you need anything—comfort, food, a lawyer—you need only phone me.

—Thank you, you are a kind and generous woman, said Ben. Good night, Isabella.

—Good night, Ben. I am at your service, anytime.

Ben had to bite his tongue to keep from saying: Isabella, you are one treacherous snake. Desirable, but total poison.

No matter how Ben tried, his damaged contrabass would not fit into its case. The bent keys kept the main joints from fitting into their custom fitted slots. He searched the closets in the apartment for a large suitcase or cloth bag. In the front hallway, he found a sail bag with a dinghy sail in it. He removed the sail, wrapped the two joints in bath towels and carefully stowed them in the sail bag. He also wrapped the metal neck and bell; both badly dented and put them in the bag. Time to make dinner.

Pascal LeRoi, aka, Roi de Quoi, arrived just as Ben was drying the last of the dishes.

—Where is the broken baby? asked Pascal.

—In here, said Ben, leading Pascal into the den.

—Nice case for a priceless contrabass clarinet. May I look at the damage?

—Sure. Just be careful, said Ben.

—*Careful?* It's already broken, mon ami

—Don't break it anymore. I'm hoping only the keys are bent.

—Looks that way, but this metal is not the strongest. I will have to be very careful not to break any keys when I straighten them, said Pascal.

Pascal pulled a magnifying glass from his pocket and started to examine the instrument carefully. After a thorough inspection, he carefully rewrapped the parts of the contrabass and returned them to the sail bag.

—On close inspection, I didn't find any cracks in the metal or the wood. The only problem is, I will need your assistance. I don't know the exact angles of the levers, how stiff the springs should be and all those delicate adjustments.

—That's good news. When can you work on it?

—Tomorrow morning. When can you come to my Aspremont studio?

—I am picking up a friend at the airport tomorrow morning at eleven, said Ben. If I come to your studio after lunch is that soon enough?

—Sooner is better. Can you come around eight and leave for the airport returning after lunch? It's only thirty minutes to the airport.

—Yes, I can make that work, said Ben.

—I will have to borrow some tools to take the dents out of the neck and the bell. Actually, now that I think of it, you can take the neck and the bell to Carmine Bezoar. He repairs brass instruments at the music store a few blocks from here. I will telephone him tomorrow morning and ask him to help us.

—That sounds good, said Ben. Write down his name and address.

—You can walk there from here, he said, writing down the man's name, Carmine Bezoar and the music store, Musique de Nice. I think Carmine arrives around seven. He likes to leave early on Saturday.

Pascal drew a simple map showing directions to the store from Ben's address

—I have to get home. Gisela worries if I'm too late. I will see you tomorrow morning as soon as you can get to my atelier. Do you remember how to find my place?

—Maybe.

Pascal wrote out directions and gave Ben the atelier telephone number.

—If you get lost, call me, said Pascal.

—I don't know how to thank you, said Ben.

—Let's see how well I do, and then we'll see how you want to thank me, said Pascal with a laugh.

—Are there police outside? asked Ben.

—Yes, they are watching my van, which is double-parked. There is a lone reporter also watching my van. It should be safe with the press and the government guarding it. I'll see you tomorrow morning early. I have family business in the late afternoon.

—I'll be there. Good night and thank you so much.

To be continued.

