

Five Million Yen: Chapter 51

by Daniel Harris

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Carmine Bezor unlocked the front door of Musique de Nice. Ben approached with his contrabass clarinet case.

—You must be Monsieur Ben Clarone, said Carmine.

—You're looking at the man himself, replied Ben.

—I'm Carmine Bezor, brass repairman and racetrack trumpeter, said Carmine shaking Ben's hand.

—Pleased to meet you. I hope you can help me out, said Ben.

Carmine opened the door, shut off the alarm and turned on the lights.

—Let me see what you have, said Carmine. Pascal LeRoi told me what happened.

—I have the neck and the bell of my contrabass clarinet in this case. They are seriously damaged. Someone threw my axe out the window.

—So I've been told, said Carmine. Sounds like something a woman would do.

—You think so? said Ben. What woman would do that to me? I don't know any women in Nice.

—If you have a big row with your wife what does she do? asked Carmine raising an eyebrow.

—She throws dishes at you, replied Ben

—Exactly.

—The police are almost certain the man they have is the culprit, said Ben.

—Maybe, but this has all the earmarks of woman's work.

Carmine removed the bell and neck from the case.

—This neck is going to be very difficult to fix, said Carmine, because of all the links to the upper joint. Pascal will have to make the final adjustments.

—I hope you can repair the neck enough so I can play the horn.

—I should get it close. The bell is no problem to fix.

—I become nervous when people tell me no problem. There's always a problem with “no problem.”

Carmine gave a knowing shrug.

—When can I pick up the horn? asked Ben.

—I'm leaving at noon, so you can pick it up after noon.

—Thank you, Monsieur Bezor, said Ben. I'm grateful you can repair it today. You're a lifesaver.

—You can call me Carmine, replied the old man. I am proud to help a world-class musician.

—Flattery will get you everywhere, laughed Ben.

The road up to Aspremont was filled with cycling clubs out for their Saturday morning ride.

Ben remembered the road and found Pascal's atelier without a hitch. He parked the car and took the sail bag with the upper and lower joints of his contrabass clarinet into Pascal LeRoi's atelier.

—How do you say in English: What ze fucking mess, asked Pascal

—You got it. You might work on your delivery. I had this horn perfectly tweaked by the best repairman in the world. Now, look at it. It's a wreck.

—Ben, I'm no woodwind specialist, but I can work metals. With your help, we can make this wreck playable, if not perfect.

They worked well as a team. Pascal had an encyclopedic knowledge of levers and metals. Ben was pleased with Pascal's skill and attention to detail. He understood the finesse of lever throw, angle and spring tension.

—You are a genius, said Ben.

—In this business, it is knowledge and skill. This cheap metal is easily worked, but also easily broken. You should tell Selmer they need a different metal for the keys.

Ben looked at his watch; it was 10:30.

—I better go. I have to meet a friend at the airport.

—Return after lunch, said Pascal. We will need to fine-tune the adjustments.

—I'll fetch the neck and the bell at Musique de Nice. We will need to do a play test. If it doesn't work, it's no good.

Pascal sighted down a long lever checking for bends and kinks.

—Are you meeting a woman? asked Pascal.

—Of course, said Ben.

—Good luck, said Pascal with a wink.

Ben pulled up to the Arrivals pick-up zone. He didn't see Monique. It was five after eleven. The police were aggressively enforcing no parking and ticketing unattended cars.

Ben made another loop around the airport drive. When he returned to the Arrivals area, there was Monique and two other Pan Am stewardesses. He pulled up to the curb, stood next to the car, and called out Monique's name. The three women walked to Ben's car.

—Sorry we're late, said Monique giving Ben an air kiss. They gave us the full search.

—Yes, real bastards said one of the stewardesses in a heavy Brooklyn accent, groping, squeezing tits, the whole nine yards.

—Ben this is Alice and Esther. Alice is from the UK and Esther is from Brooklyn.

—Pleased to meet you, said Ben. All three of the women looked good to Ben, but Monique was the class act.

Ben put their luggage in the trunk.

—Where to? asked Ben.

—I think Alice and Esther want to go to the usual cheap hotel near the airport. Is that right, girls?

—Yes, said Esther. I need sleep. I am so sleep deprived I'm out of my mind.

—Me, too, said Alice. The hotel is just past the airport on the left. If Monique goes with you, there will only be the two of us in one bed, otherwise it would be three.

—That sounds too cozy, said Ben.

—It's the peripatetic stewardess life, said Monique.

—I have bunk beds in one of the bedrooms where I'm staying, if you wish to sleep there, offered Ben.

—Oh no, we don't want to rain on Monique's parade, said Esther.

—Suit yourself, said Ben, but the offer stands.

After Ben dropped off Alice and Esther, he drove towards his lodging.

—Are you hungry Monique? asked Ben.

—I'm more sleepy than hungry. What did you have in mind?

—Well, there is a good restaurant near my place, or I can make you my breakfast special.

—What's that?

—A Brie and raspberry omelet with hot Italian sausage, biscotti, and good coffee or tea. There's a well-stocked liquor cabinet if you need a sedative.

—I'd love to take a hot shower and have breakfast at your place, if that's all right with you. Then I'd like to sleep.

—Well, that works out perfectly. There was a little accident and my instrument is in the repair shop, so I will be gone all afternoon working with the repairmen.

Tonight we can go to a picnic, or you can just sleep the night away.

—I'm too exhausted for a picnic with strangers. You can go. I'll be good and rested when you return.

—Okay, we'll do that.

By the time Ben had washed the dishes, Monique was almost asleep in the second bedroom. He walked in to check on her, turned off the light and gave her a light kiss on the forehead.

—Thank you, Ben for that wonderful breakfast and being so understanding, said Monique yawning.

—Sleep tight. I'll return about nine or ten tonight. This is important: do *not* answer the door. Let the answering machine answer the phone.

Ben sat in Pascal's atelier and began assembling his contrabass clarinet.

—This will be the test of *al Aceed*, said Ben, the acid test.

—Acid test? said Pascal.

—Yes, the proof of the work. It comes from using acid to separate gold from other metals.

Ben moved his fingers on the keys. They felt nicely familiar. He played an open G. There was a loud squeal.

—That's not good, said Ben. Something is leaking in the upper part of the horn. Between here and here, he said pointing to the length of tube needed to play an open G.

—Hmmm, said Pascal.

—What we need to do is put a small light inside the tube and look for light coming out from under pads.

Pascal found a small fluorescent lamp and inserted it in the upper joint.

—I see the problem, said Ben. This key is rotated every so slightly causing the leak.

Pascal took a small pair of pliers and finessed the key into position. Ben did not get a warm happy feeling about the chances for a successful repair. It was four o'clock and this was only the first play test. It could be a long night. He might have to borrow Arno Donax's contrabass for tomorrow night and Monday morning.

Pascal looked at a few more keys and made similar adjustments.

—Now try it, said Pascal.

Ben gave a tentative toot of the open G. Worked perfectly.

—Much better, said Ben with some relief.

They worked until six. By that time the contra was playing nearly as well as it was before the tragedy.

—Can you change the throw of this lever? asked Ben, after playing a particularly wicked passage from Hausenstockman's *Constellations*.

An hour later they both left the shop. Ben was very pleased with the way the contra played. Pascal had to hurry to the opera.

—Come to our home for a picnic tomorrow, said Pascal as he drove past Ben.

Ciao!

—Grazie mille, Pascal, shouted Ben at Pascal's disappearing van.

The picnic at Clovis Pennymaker and Michel Marteau's home was a big success. Clovis's children were fascinated by the contrabass and began singing their favorite songs imitating the sound of contrabass to the annoyance of the adults. Clovis's barbeque ribs and sweet potato pie were as good as anything Kansas City could offer. Michel Marteau, Clovis's sculptor husband, did a wonderful pen and ink sketch of Ben playing the contrabass with the children watching in awe.

Later, driving back to his digs, Ben was nicely tipsy and happy with the repair job that Pascal LeRoi had done. He was sorry he wasn't able to thank Carmine Bezor. Carmine's job was masterful and the instrument played and sounded as if the tragedy never happened, though it sported cosmetic wounds.

Not knowing if Monique was asleep or awake, Ben entered the apartment on tiptoe. Monique was sitting in the kitchen in her bathrobe drinking tea.

—Hey, sleeping beauty, how are you? asked Ben in a loud voice.

—Hush, Ben, you'll wake the dead. I had such a delicious sleep. You have no idea how exhausted I am.

—I can believe that. I spent the last three months on a global tour. I'm still sleep deprived, said Ben. Between the jet lag and the

changes in languages, I was so exhausted; I barely knew which country I was in.

He was excited to be in Monique's presence. She was not made up and she had a clean wholesome look. His blood was up, but he didn't want to spoil anything by pushing the sex issue.

—I have Champagne if you would like some, said Ben.

—A little Champagne would be perfect. I sleep like an infant after I've had Champagne.

—Two Champagnes coming up.

—Ben, I don't know you well enough to sleep with you. Will you be offended if I sleep in the other bedroom?

—Monique, do what you are most comfortable doing.

—Thank you, Ben. Somehow I knew you were a good man, said Monique.

—A lusty man, but a respectful one, joked Ben.

—What's on the agenda for tomorrow? asked Monique.

—I have a gig at Bar Oiseaux Ésothérique tomorrow night at nine. Plan on it, and have your stewardess friends join us. There is no cover charge for women on Sunday nights and the music, of course will be great. You can never have too many women in a jazz club.

—I'll call Alice and Esther and ask them to join me, said Monique.

—That's good because I'll be on the bandstand all night, said Ben.

—We're invited to a picnic at Pascal and Gisela's chateau tomorrow afternoon, added Ben. Pascal repaired my horn. You will enjoy them, Gisela is Austrian and Pascal is French.

Halfway through her second glass, Monique began nodding off.

—Monique, you should go to bed. You are falling asleep.

—So sorry.

—Come, I'll show you to your bed.

Ben straightened up the bedding and fluffed the pillows while Monique used the bathroom.

—I love the shower in this bathroom, said Monique.

—It's great. I use it also, but I'll use the one in the master bathroom tonight.

—I am so tired, yawned Monique.

—Bedtime sleepyhead, said Ben.

Monique gave Ben a soft kiss on the lips.

Ben awoke when the rain began at four in the morning. He got up and checked the windows. When he returned to his bed, a warm and affectionate Monique greeted him under the covers. She embraced him with more womanly comfort and sincerity than he could remember. Ben's fatigue and stress melted away in Monique's arms. Their lovemaking was no rude rut, but a slow discovery of pleasures and emotions.

To be continued

