Five Million Yen: Chapter 52

by Daniel Harris

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—Hey, lover man, where's my breakfast? said Monique, tousling Ben's hair.

—What time is it? asked Ben.

—Noon. Aye, the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the very prick of noon, recited Monique, quoting Mercutio's speech from *Romeo and Juliet*.

—Another hour, begged Ben.

—You can't ravish a woman three times and not feed her breakfast, whined Monique pulling the sheet up to cover her upper body.

—How did this Venus get into my bed? asked Ben.

—She descended from the clouds and seduced this castaway. I am *Nausicaä*, come to save this Odysseus: Clarone.

—That's pretty literary, what's your story girl? asked Ben.

Monique looked away and then faced Ben searching his eyes for sincerity.

—The Nazis shot my father because he hid a Jewish family in Amsterdam during WWII. I was a newborn when it happened. They also shot my mother and threw me into a canal. A childless couple that lived on a canal barge saved me. We traveled all over Europe by canal. That's why I speak so many languages.

—After my divorce, she continued, I switched from canal boats to airplanes. My adoptive parents are still independent barge

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transporters. They were the most loving parents a child could have. They found out I was named Monique Zwaan, and kept my name. Zwaan means swan. Monique means adviser. My adoptive parents called me the wise swan because I was so studious and observant. My adoptive parents gave me the nickname, Spelen Speelagoed which means play toy, because I was always acting out stories and plays. On my passport my name is Monique Zwaan. Thankfully, I never changed my name when I married.

—That's some life story, said Ben, shaking his head. My life is boring. Musical prodigy. Work as a musician, mostly in the studio. I'm sure you've heard me play on recordings without knowing it was I.

—I discovered many things about you. You're a famous jazz musician and virtuoso new music performer. Your estranged wife is Zoë Bontemps; the star of *I'd Rather Not* on American television.

—You've found me out, said Ben

—I like to find out what kind of waffles you make lover boy? teased Monique

—Waffles she demands, and waffles it shall be, said Ben imitating her voice.

Monique bent down to kiss Ben.

—But first, this very prick of noon will ravish you, said Ben pulling Monique to him.

He was in the best mood ever. Please don't let anything ruin it, he thought to himself. He had no faith in his luck. Monique seemed like the woman he needed.

After breakfast they dressed and walked down to the sea. The rain had stopped, but the sky was overcast with low grey scudding clouds, big waves broke on the beaches. To passers-by, they could have been a honeymoon couple. They were intoxicated with love.

—Are you real? asked Ben.

—Are you? replied Monique.

—I can't believe this is not a dream, said Ben.

—It's real Ben. Just love me, said Monique.

— What a treasure you are. I can't believe this is happening to me.

—To *us*, countered Monique.

The picnic at Pascal and Gisela LeRoi's chateau was a grand success. The children loved hearing the contrabass and Monique and Gisela were immediate friends. Pascal's children fought for Monique's attention. Since it looked like more rain, they dined inside.

—Mama, what language should we speak? asked Sabine, Pascal's oldest daughter,

—What language is most comfortable for you Monique? asked Gisela.

—Oh, I speak most European languages badly, said Monique. Why do you ask?

—We speak a different language at table each meal, explained Gisela. It's good for the children.

—Ben, what language do you want to speak at table? asked Monique.

—I'll go with French.

—Not English or Italian?

—No, French. I need the practice.

Pascal had roasted a big turkey on a spit outside. He carved up the turkey and served the children and then served the guests. By this time, Ben had uttered about five sentences in French.

—Mama, I think we better switch to English, said Sabine in German. Our guest speaks French with a horrid accent.

—Sabine! These are our guests, scolded Gisela.

—Mr. Clarone, wouldn't you be happier speaking English? asked Sabine.

—Well, if I have all these critics, probably yes. You see Sabine, when you play a contrabass clarinet; the vibrations shake all the

languages out of your head and you speak like you ate a lot of beans.

The children thought that Ben was very funny and began making contrabass clarinet sounds, all except Sabine, who gave Ben a stern look.

—Very funny, Mr. Clarone, said Sabine. I speak as many languages as Gisela.

—Sabine, be polite, said Pascal. Monique and Ben are guests.

Ben was always amused when children called their parents by their parent's given names.

—Sabine, let's call a truce, said Monique, and speak English. It's the international language.

—Don't argue with Monique. English it is, said Pascal.

—Papa, said the youngest son, I hate English. It's worse than German.

—You're correct about that, said Ben.

After dinner there was a break in the weather so they toured the grounds. A motorcycle came down the road and Pascal's dog chased it.

—*Hund! Kommen sie heir*, shouted Pascal.

The dog stopped and trotted back to the group with his rail drooping.

—You see, German always works with running dogs, proclaimed Pascal with a smile.

—Pascal, be nice, said Gisela, you French have had your dspots too, you know.

When Ben and Monique returned to Ben's place, they couldn't jump in bed fast enough.

After a quick shower together, they drove to Bar Oiseaux Ésotérique. Ben found a parking place a block away.

Monique wore tight jeans, Ben's tux shirt with an Hermés scarf, and sleek black pumps. Now that she was rested and loved, she glowed.

—Hey, Mr. Brown, you said you would bring a beautiful woman, not the *most* beautiful woman, said Lezardino when Monique and Ben walked into the club.

—Mr. Green, I only travel first class, said Ben.

—Lez, may I introduce you to Monique Zwaan. Monique, say hello to the greatest vibraphonist in the world, Giovanni Lezardino, said Ben. We call him Lez. The Mr. Green & Mr. Brown is a running joke.

—*Enchanté*, said Lez, undressing Monique with his eyes.

—The guy with all the flutes and clarinets, continued Ben, is Luc Martino, pointing to Luc who was setting up his instruments.

Luc gave a perfunctory wave, but then saw Monique and hurried over to get a better look. Luc turned on the charm.

—Such a beautiful woman, Ben, said Luc.

—She has two friends who will be here tonight, said Ben.

—Forget the friends, this woman is beautiful enough for me anytime, said Luc.

—I'm so sorry, Luc, I have chosen Ben, said Monique, giving Luc her professional stewardess smile.

Just then the Monique's two fellow stewardesses walked into the club.

—What the fuck? said Lez in English.

—Who are those babes? said Luc in English.

—Friends of Monique, said Ben. You decadent lowlifes should appreciate the class I bring to this dump.

By the second set, the place was crowded. The three stewardesses had four or five guys hitting on them simultaneously. They couldn't pay for a drink.

The last tune of the night began with Luc playing a didgeridoo. Ben joined in on the contrabass and the room rumbled with low frequency energy. By the end of the tune, Lez was sawing the resonator tubes of his vibes with a string bass bow. Luc was playing faint whistle tones on an Andean condor leg-bone flute. Ben had a *sotto voce* slap tongue percussion vamp working under it all.

Without warning, Ben went into overdrive, taking off at a blistering tempo. Luc switched to a bass clarinet and Lez went to six mallets. Twenty minutes later, Lez's vibes were capsized on the floor, Ben was exhausted, Luc's reed was *fakakta* and the audience was wild with whistling, clapping and bravos.

It was after 1 a.m. when Ben and Monique left the club. Lez and Luc spirited the two stewardesses away to an all night restaurant.

—Undressing for bed, Ben remembered, he better warn Monique.

—I'm afraid, sweetheart, I will wake you with the contrabass tomorrow morning at 7:30. I need to warm-up before I leave for my nine o'clock rehearsal, said Ben.

—I won't mind, said Monique.

—Easy for you to say now, but in five hours it won't seem very nice.

—Ben, could you shave, so your face isn't so scratchy?

—For you, Monique, of course.

Ben was almost asleep when the phone rang. He slid out of the bed, trying not to wake Monique, and hurried into the den.

—Allo?

—Ben, it's Anatoly. Anatoly Gringovitch.

Ben could tell that Gringovitch was drunk.

—Hey man, what's up, asked Ben. It's two in the morning.

—Shouldn't bother a jazz musician, laughed Gringovitch. Did you receive my telegram?

—Sure did. *The Black and the Red* is safe, said Ben.

—Are you sure? Arris has been telling me you are double-crossing us.

—Arris is full of it. The police are looking for him on a murder warrant.

—So where are the paintings? I heard that Yolande's was bombed. What about *Abstract with Yellow*?

—Yousef Al Sidran has it at Découvrir Art in Marseilles. All is good Anatoly. And there is more.

—What?

—I took the liberty of having Girolamo Dente make oil copies of the gouache over-paintings. Here's the split: 35% to Dente, 15% to me and 50% to you. Do you like that?

There was a long silence.

—You gave too much to Dente. Should be only 25%.

—I tried that, but he wouldn't go there. He wanted 40%. I figured my idea was worth more than 10%. I even have a potential dealer, Isabella Sanitizarre, the main procuress for the Museum of Contemporary Art at Villa Arson in Nice.

There was another long silence on the line. Ben could hear ice in a glass.

—Ben, if you think Arris is a devious crook, wait until you tangle with that bitch. Did she say how much she would pay?

—I haven't talked about it yet, said Ben. Dente copied *Abstract with Yellow* and it's in a bank vault in Nice. He's working on *The Black and the Red*. I should have it and Gorky's cleaned original *Unfaithful Wife* in the bank vault by Tuesday or Wednesday.

—My star is rising, boasted Gringovitch. I sold out my last exhibit and the average price was $110k. I'll have to look at the job Dente did. If it's up to his high standards and the paintings are as good as I remember, a quarter million dollars each to start.

—Serious moola, said Ben with a whistle.

—I like the way you think, Ben. You're pretty clever for a bumbling bad-luck horn player.

—Don't forget, my friend, I'm a Chicago boy, said Ben.

Ben looked at the clock on the desk.

—Anatoly, I have to get some sleep. I have a rehearsal in less than six hours.

—All right, but call me when both paintings are in the bank vault.

—I will. How's the family?

—Everybody is fine. The boys are turning their Roman friends into Brooklyn street hoods. They also swear in the foulest Italian. I don't even know what filth they're saying half the time.

—Hey, you went the fatherhood route, chided Ben.

—True. My wife made me do it. I'll let you go. You're probably bouncing some young thing off the sheets.

—Not quite, my friend.

—Ciao, and call me when the paintings are all in the bank.

—Got it. Ciao. Bacci.

—Bacci. Ciao.

—Who was that you were talking to? said Monique yawning.

—My great old friend, Anatoly Gringovitch. He's on the verge of being the next big thing among international painters. He and I go back to 1950's Chicago.

—Good night. My love. Did you set an alarm?

—Ah. You're the best. I forgot.

Ben set two alarms, kissed Monique goodnight and was immediately asleep. Monique fell asleep smiling.

To be continued.