

Five Million Yen: Chapter 53

by Daniel Harris

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Monique woke and cuddled against Ben. She nibbled his ear. Ben could feel the warmth of her body and the tickling in his ear.

—Monique, is it time to get up?

—No, but you have some duties to perform, teased Monique.

Ben studied her face, trying to imprint its features in his mind.

Monique had large brown eyes that bespoke an innocent vulnerability. Her fine nose and shapely lips contrasted with strong cheekbones. Dark hair, cut short and stylish, framed her angular face whose smooth skin softened her strong features.

—Monique, you are some beauty.

—Well, you're a good specimen yourself. I love that you are a musician.

—Not the best occupation for a husband, said Ben.

—Well, stewardess isn't the best for a wife.

Monique looked Ben in the eye.

—Let's not plan too far ahead, she said. You have some conjugal duties to perform right now, lover man.

Ben sang Irving Berlin's *Blue Skies* in the shower.

Blue skies

Smiling at me

Nothing but blue skies

Do I see.

When he went into the bedroom to dress, Monique was fast asleep hugging his pillow.

Monique was awakened by falling china in the kitchen. It didn't sound like anything broke. She fell asleep only to be reawakened by the sound of Ben ripping through scales on his contrabass clarinet. She walked naked into the kitchen. An espresso pot was bubbling on the stove. Monique prepared a plate of biscotti and coffee and brought it to Ben.

—Ben, coffee and biscotti. Do you want something more? Eggs and sausage?

—Monique, how am I supposed to concentrate when you are standing there bare as *September Morn*?

Monique's body was a study in contrasts. Her head perched gracefully on an elegant neck. Well-toned muscles belied her delicate features. Firm breasts contrasted with a hint of belly. Her small waist set off womanly hips, giving her the classic hourglass shape. Delicate knees joined her sensuous thighs and strong calves. She moved her arms and hands as she spoke, her long fingers moving like a Balinese dancer's. Monique smiled as Ben's eyes stroked her body. Her smile lit up her face making her whole body sing in harmony.

—When will you return from Monte Carlo? said Monique.

—The rehearsal lasts until noon. I should return to Nice before one. Let's plan on having lunch. I know a terrific restaurant in the old quarter.

—I'll tidy the apartment and be ready for you, said Monique.

—You don't have to do that; there is a maid that comes on Mondays at nine. She has a key, try and be decent when she arrives. She caught me in the shower Friday. It was embarrassing. Her name is Françoise.

—Rats, I was hoping to sleep all morning.

Ben arrived fifteen minutes before the rehearsal. News of his disaster was the talk of the orchestra. Hans Hausenstockmann, the

composer of *Constellations*, approached Ben as he assembled his contrabass.

—Ben we read the tragic news. Is your instrument working all right?

—Yes, I found two amazing technicians who repaired it for me. It is not pretty, but it works perfectly.

—Well, the bloom has gone off the rose, said Hans, examining the battered neck and bell. I can see where keys have been straighten. It must have been heartbreaking.

—Almost destroyed me, said Ben. It plays well. I tested it on *Constellations* before I left the shop.

—I am pleased to hear that, said Hans. I love the sound of this instrument when you play it. It is much more powerful than I imagined.

A slight man carrying a violin case approached Ben.

—You're lucky, Clarone, said the man. If you lived near a cliff or the sea, you wouldn't have an instrument.

—Who are you? asked Ben.

—Antonini Cattivino. You know my mother, Françoise. She cleans the apartment where you are staying.

—Françoise is due to arrive there any minute, said Ben.

—You are probably correct, replied Antonini.

Antonini turned hitting Ben's contrabass with his violin case. Ben reflexively grabbed the instrument.

—Jesus man! Pay attention, said Ben.

—I don't like the whiff of that man, said Hausenstockmann. That seemed deliberate.

—Do you think so?

This was the first rehearsal that the orchestra was prepared well enough so that Igor Markevitch, the conductor, was able to draw out the drama and beauty of *Constellations*. During the break, many members of the orchestra came up to inspect the contrabass and commiserate with Ben on his bad luck

—Do they know who did such a thing? said the principal trumpet.
—The police think they have the man, but some people think it was a woman.

Monique heard the doorbell. Ben's instructions were to never answer the door, so she ignored it. Twenty minutes later, she heard a key turning in the lock. She was dressed and prepared to go out.

—I'm so sorry to bother you Madam. I don't know what happened to my key, said Françoise to Isabella Sanitizzare who let her into the flat.

—Those keys are very expensive, said Isabella Sanitizzare. You will have to find it, or you will be forced to pay for the lock to be re-keyed.

The two women stopped, startled by Monique, who was standing in the foyer dressed in a Chanel suit, Hermes scarf and beret. Her attire and natural beauty produced a striking glamorous allure.

—You gave me a fright, said Françoise.

—Just who *are you*? said Isabella Sanitizzare. Clarone's wife?

—I'm a friend of Ben Clarone's. He invited me to stay here, said Monique taken aback by Isabella's hostility.

—The conditions of his residency prohibit guests staying here, said Isabella.

—And who, may I ask *are you*? said Monique.

—Isabella Sanitizzare, representative of the owners of this flat. They allowed Ben Clarone to stay here for the duration of his residency with the Monte Carlo Orchestra, but he was *not* to have guests. You must leave now!

Monique was non-plused. Ben never mentioned that he wasn't allowed guests. Was this a jealous lover of Ben's? Monique remembered the name, Isabella Sanitizzare, from last night's telephone call from Gringovitch.

—Where do you get your authority? asked Monique. Ben never told me that it was forbidden for me to stay here.

—As I said, I represent the owners of this flat. You are trespassing. You must leave at once.

—I don't think so.

Isabella had fire in her eye.

—Listen you Dutch bitch, said Isabella, either *you* are out of here in two minutes, or I will have the police arrest *you* for criminal trespass.

—Don't call me a Dutch bitch, you virago. I'll leave, but you will *pay* for this bullying, big time.

—Don't threaten me you lowlife whore. Who do you think you are? Ben has been my lover for five years. You're a naïf. Pack your bags and go back to servicing men in airplane bathrooms. The streets are next for you *cattive ragazze!*

Monique slapped Isabella hard on the cheek. Isabella lunged at Monique, but Monique's tripped her and she dropped to the floor. Françoise, the maid, ran into the living room.

Monique walked, as casually as she could, into the second bedroom and began packing her suitcase.

—Don't you touch me, threatened Monique as Isabella entered the bedroom, I'm leaving.

Isabella ran at Monique. Monique pulled the maneuver she was taught in anti-highjack training. She grabbed Isabella's hair as she came full force at her and pulled her head into a closet door jam. With a thud, Isabella was unconscious. Monique calmly finished packing, took her suitcase, gave Isabella, who sat holding her head, a contemptuous look, and left the apartment.

Monique didn't know what was true. Did Ben love her, or was she just weekend sport? Was Isabella really Ben's lover for the last five years? Did Zoë Bontemps leave Ben because he was having an affair with Isabella? Too many questions

When she arrived on the sidewalk, Victor Taxi was parked across the street from the building.

—Taxi?

—Yes, take me to Hôtel La Puce near the airport. It was the cheap hotel where the other stewardesses were lodged.

—Are you Clarone's wife? said Victor

—Why do you ask? said Monique, annoyed by the question from a stranger.

—I have a tip for you. The maid's son was in Ben's apartment on Friday afternoon.

—Are you saying that the maid's son might be the one who threw Ben's instrument out the window?

—Maybe, said Victor.

—How do you know that? Were you there? asked Monique.

—I saw him descending the stairs as I was going up.

—Why would you be in the building?

—I was on a mission for Gringovitch's partner, Dan Arris.

Monique was confused. What kind of people was Ben involved with who would throw his rare instrument out a window? She paid Victor and entered Hôtel La Puce. She told the desk to call for Alice and Esther.

As Ben drove to Nice he thought of all the wonderful tastes and experiences he would show Monique. When he pulled up in front of his apartment, he noticed that the police car was no longer parked in front. He assumed he was free from surveillance.

Françoise was ironing one of Ben's shirts in the kitchen when he walked into the apartment.

—Françoise where is Monique?

—She departed, replied Françoise.

—Departed?

—She packed her suitcase and departed. Isabella Sanitizzare evicted her.

—Isabella evicted her?

—Why?

—She was here illegally. You cannot have overnight guests.

—Who said that?

—Isabella. I know the owners and Isabella is correct.

Ben was furious. Again bad luck fell his way. He went into the bedroom and packed all his belongings into his backpack. He grabbed the shirt Françoise was ironing. He left with all his belongings and his contrabass, slamming the door of the apartment so hard a fire extinguisher in the hallway fell to the floor.

Ben hoped Monique went to the hotel where the other stewardesses were lodged. When Ben arrived at Hôtel la Puce, he ran inside. In the lobby he saw Alice, Esther and Monique. Monique was weeping and blowing her nose.

—Monique, what the Hell happened? asked Ben.

Monique only wept more intensely when she heard Ben's voice.

—You bastard, said Esther. You used and abused Monique. How dare you show your face?

—What?

—Yes, you, Esther continued. You, Ben Clarone, took your pleasures from Monique knowing all the while you had a girlfriend stashed here in Nice. Monique's not your sex toy, you son of a bitch. We've a good mind to kick the crap out of you.

—Wait, wait, Wait a minute. What are you talking about? I love Monique. There is no other woman.

A black silence descended. Two hotel guests stared at the quartet as they walked through the lobby.

—I love Monique, repeated Ben, trying to defuse the situation. Not twenty minutes ago I arrived at my apartment and the maid told me that Isabella Sanitizzare had thrown Monique out. I grabbed all my belongings and came here double-time, praying I would find Monique.

Monique started to explain what happened. Her story was interrupted by outbursts of sobbing and nose blowing.

— This is crazy, said Ben raising his voice. I've never touched Isabella. I didn't know who she was until a week ago. No one told me

I couldn't have guests. These are all *lies*. That bitch, Isabella, is lying. She has framed me.

—But, you were cozy with her grandmother on the plane last week, said Monique. Claudia told me who she was.

—Monique, sweetheart, I'm friendly to everyone, said Ben. That's how I survive traveling all over the world. You're the same.

Ben put the pieces together. Isabella was injecting her poison. The immediate problem was how to mollify Monique. He was miserable watching his beloved breaking down. How could he repair the damage? It was all lies, but to Monique the lies could be true. How would Monique know the truth from the fiction?

—Monique, I adore you. You must know this. I would never betray you or deceive you. You must believe me. Isabella is poison. You know that. You heard Gringovitch last night when you were listening in on the other phone.

The two other women glared at Ben.

—Come let me hold you, said Ben, walking over to where she was sitting. Come.

Monique stood up and fell into Ben's arms. Ben rubbed her back and kissed her cheek.

—Monique, I'm an innocent victim of hateful people. I would never hurt you. We are both the targets of an ambitious and vile woman.

—Ben, I want to believe you. I suffered so many humiliating infidelities by my ex-husband, a sea captain with a girl or two in every port. I so wanted you to be faithful and honest.

—Well, when Françoise said you left, I came directly here. I was terrified you would think the worst and that I would never see you again. I was grief stricken.

—Hold me tight, Ben. Just hold me tight.

Ben wiped Monique's cheeks with his handkerchief.

—Let me call my contact in Marseilles, said Ben. If he has finished the work he was doing for me, we can drive to Marseilles.

—I have to be at the airport at 10:00 tomorrow morning, said Monique.

—I'll get you there. Never missed a downbeat in my life, said Ben with pride.

Ben called Girolamo Dente. The two paintings were ready. The copy was not completely dry, but if Ben were careful, he could pick it up.

—Come, Monique. We are out of this flop. Girls, Monique will see you at the airport tomorrow morning.

—She better arrive happy, warned Esther, or you will pay, Clarone. You've caused enough damage already.

—But I didn't do anything, said Ben. I'm the one who is being attacked. My rare instrument was tossed out a window and a contemptible woman is trying to separate Monique and I. I am beleaguered by duplicity.

To Be Continued

