Five Million Yen: Chapter 54

by Daniel Harris

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By the time Ben made the turn south to Marseille from Aix-en-Provence, Monique was in high spirits and happy to be traveling with him. She was smiling and relating funny stories of canal life. Ben was cheered to see Monique in good spirits again.

—Monique, said Ben, let me explain some things. You may remember I brought two paintings with me on the plane last week. They were paintings by my friend Gringovitch, the man who telephoned me last night. They are sold, but to whom, I don't know. I do know that Isabella Sanitizzare covets them. She would also like to be Gringovitch's dealer in France.

Gringovitch, Ben continued, over painted the painting he owns with a temporary medium to avoid customs issues. I asked a renowned copyist, Girolamo Dente to make a copy of Gringovitch's over painting before Dente removed it.

—I heard something about that last night on the phone, interjected Monique.

—These are the paintings we are picking up today. We will drive back to Nice this evening and we'll stay at Le Negresco, the best hotel on the French Riviera.

—But Ben, the Negresco is so expensive.

—I played a big jam at Le Negresco last time I was here. The bar made a fortune. I'm sure they will give me a favorable rate.

—Wow, Le Negresco. I've never even been inside. Isn't it only for royalty and movie stars? said Monique.

—We qualify, my dear. We qualify.

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Monique gave Ben a kiss on the cheek.

—Tomorrow, said Ben, I will ask Jean-Claude to book a hotel. No more private residences. I will give you the contact information. How will I contact you?

—That's a little confusing, said Monique. I'm based in New York City, but my home address is in Amsterdam. The physical place in Holland is my adoptive parent's barge, which is named after me, *Monique Zwaan*. They do not have a telephone. They communicate by marine radio. You should leave a message at Pam Am Ops. I will call you when I'm not flying.

—Nothing in my life is easy.

—Please Ben, don't worry. I will call you, probably more times than you want.

—Not possible, darling. Dial away.

Ben was now familiar with the neighborhood around Découvrir Art. He found a parking place and they walked to Découvrir Art

Ben entered the code: 36C7. His mnemonic was Claudia's bra size and a 7th chord. The shade of Claudia's last embrace flitted through his mind. Monique ran up the first two flights and waited for Ben. She teased him because he was so winded.

— Monique, you are in such good shape. What kind of woman are you?

—The best, of course. I go to the gym whenever I'm on the ground. I never know if I will have to help a large passenger off the floor, or if I will need strength for an emergency.

—You constantly amaze me.

They stopped on a landing and Ben took Monique in his arms.

—Ben, I love you so much. I hope you are not deceiving me.

—Darling, I have never loved a woman as I love you. You have totally captured me. What a prize you are.

—Just love me, I will be your ally for life.

Signor Dente was waiting at the door when they arrived.

—Ah, Clarone, I see you brought a beautiful woman.

—Signor Dente, meet Monique Zwann, she's Dutch, said Ben in Italian. Monique, said Ben in English, meet the most famous art copyist in the history of art, Girolamo Dente, he said in English.

— *Leuk je te ontmoeten, Missen Zwann*, said Dente in Italianized Dutch.

— *Mijn plezier*, replied Monique.

They entered the front room of Découvrir Art.

—Where are the paintings? said Ben

—In the other room, said Dente, leading Ben and Monique to his workroom.

The two paintings were on easels in Dente's atelier.

—Ben, those are such beautiful paintings, said Monique, but they don't seem like they are by the same artists.

—Exactly Monique, they are *not* by the same artist. This one is by Gringovitch titled *The Black and The Red* and the other is an Arshile Gorky's painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*. We are taking them both back to Nice to put in a bank vault. There are buyers for both, but the sale is not for a month or more. Gringovitch owns the Gorky and painted the original of this, which Signor Dente copied in oils.

—The original was in cheap student gouache, said Dente interrupting.

—Are these the paintings that Isabella wants? said Monique.

—Not “wants,” covets, said Ben. The Gorky may be worth millions. The Gringovitch is worth probably half a million today, but most likely millions in a few years. Dealers typically receive a 50% commission on purchases. Now you know why Isabella is so intent to secure my assistance in procuring the Gringovitch paintings and helping her become Gringovitch's dealer in France. She will destroy anything that gets in her way, that's her reputation. I don't intend to be destroyed, or lose you.

—Ben she is totally unprincipled, said Monique. I know she will try to seduce you. I can tell she is a cunning vixen. What am I to do? I will be worried when I am away.

— *Vær ikke bekymret. Han er forelsket i dig*, said Dente.

—What did he say?

—Don't worry he loves you, said Monique.

—That's for sure, Monique. I've been through enough fear of losing you for one lifetime just today.

—Ben, you are so sweet.

As they maneuvered their way out of Marseille's late afternoon traffic, Monique laid a bombshell on Ben.

—The taxi diver who took me to Hôtel La Puce told me that the son of the maid, Françoise, was in your apartment Friday.

—Who was the driver?

—A man named Victor. His taxi was called Victor Taxi.

—How did he know who you were?

—He asked if I were your wife, said Monique.

—What did you tell him?

—Nothing.

—How would he know who was in my apartment? I was there when the police arrested Victor when *he* was coming out of my apartment.

—He said he was working for Dan Arris and went to your apartment to collect a painting.

—No matter which residence I have in France, everyone seems to have access to it. Monique I apologize for all the trouble this has caused between us, but there are two issues. The first problem is business associates of Gringovitch, Dan Arris and Isabella Sanitizzare, think I am double-crossing them, then there are a few people in the Monte Carlo Orchestra who are angry with me for standing up for the composer and the concerto I'm playing. Some of the complainers were cut out of this performance. They want revenge because they lost money. They have the musician's union on their side. The orchestra manager rubbed salt into the wound when he negotiated two extra rehearsals, meaning more pay for some and an even bigger loss of pay for those who were cut.

—It all sounds so silly. You're just a horn player, said Monique.

—They all want to harm me. They are not after you, but they know I love you, so you might be in danger, except you are leaving tomorrow morning.

—Ben, I'm not in immediate danger am I? said Monique. I did hurt Isabella pretty badly.

—Monique, you will be in my protection for the rest of your stay. By the time of the concert, it will be over.

—I hope that doesn't mean you will be in danger, said Monique.

—Well, after tomorrow morning, all the paintings worth money will be in my bank vault. Hurting me won't get them released. And, the police are seeking Dan Arris, one of the Gringovitch's partners in this deal for possibly killing Claudia, his wife.

—What did you just say, Ben? Which Claudia? Claudia Arris? You mean the Claudia, I worked with last week is dead?

—Didn't they tell you at Pan Am? asked Ben.

—No. No one said anything to us about Claudia. I assumed she was flying another route.

—She died at the Ritz in Paris, a week ago Friday, from a fall in a shower, or that's the story. The police are looking for her husband, Dan Arris. Arris is an international art dealer and convicted forger. He escaped serious trouble before because he was a double agent working for the CIA and the KGB. His conviction for forgery cost Claudia her job at Pan AM, but a cop in New York City, Lieutenant Harold Smith, who is head of art fraud, convinced her to be a honey trap for the New York City Police Department and INTERPOL. Part of the deal was that she drop her divorce suit against Arris. Smith got her reinstated into her job at Pan Am. Arris was using her as a honey trap to ensnare me.

—Why you? said Monique.

—I knew Claudia from couple of flights when she was on the London route. Her instructions, in a telegram in Claudia's handbag I saw on the flight last week, were to follow me and to make sure I delivered the two paintings.

By Clarone cleverness, I managed to get the proper receipts, though both of the deliveries were compromised. The first, because the owner's place of business was blown up, and the second because Arris didn't mail the receipt soon enough. Arris suspected something and thought Claudia and I were in league against him.

—Ben, this is astounding. I don't know what to believe. Are you a musician, or an international crook?

—I delivered two paintings, Monique, and I'm playing a concert. That is my only role. I'm done except for the concert.

—But you will have all the paintings in your personal bank vault, which makes you a target for this guy Arris and Isabella Sanitizzare.

Monique slid as far away from Ben as she could and sulked. The drive to Nice continued in silence. Ben's mind was working. I need to get a more secure place to stay. I also need to find a soprano and tenor saxophone for Ravel's *Bolero*. I need to separate myself from Isabella and Dan Arris. It would be nice to get my contra shinny and properly repaired and adjusted.

Even though they had the least expensive room in the Negresco, it was luxury beyond their experience. The patron remembered Ben from the big all night jam the year before. He gave Ben the room for a quarter of the price.

They had a sumptuous meal in the dinning room. The wait staff pampered Monique. She was radiant, though a little cool toward Ben. The table was dressed with a small punchbowl filled with champagne cocktail guarded by a carved ice swan serenely floating on the cocktail pond. The champagne cocktails were intoxicating, but they didn't lubricate the conversation.

—Ben, how did they know to put a swan in the punch bowl?

—I will never tell.

—Ben, you are so sweet, but so complicated.

—Look, Monique, I love you, but times are tough, as you have experienced.

—I love you too Ben, but I am worried.

Ben called the front desk and said they must be awakened at eight. Monique told Ben to sleep on the foldout bed in the sitting room of their suite. About four in the morning Monique came and asked him to join her in the big bed. They made slow and delicious love. Monique fell asleep pressed hard against Ben.

Ben smiled thinking of five-foot nine Monique slamming six-foot Isabella head first into a door jam. The dark thoughts of Claudia, Isabella, Arris and Gringovitch receded from his mind as he felt Monique's warm and womanly body against him. Monique, what a woman.

The front desk called at exactly eight o'clock. There was a knock on the door.

—Valet service.

Ben donned a hotel robe and answered the door. The valet had all of Monique's clothes cleaned and pressed. He tipped the valet generously.

—Ben who was that?

—Your clothes freshly cleaned and pressed. I thought I would surprise you. After you went to sleep I called the valet service and gave them all your clothes.

—Ah, that was so nice of you and I was being so bitchy. Come to bed. Now that I don't have to iron my blouse, we have time.

Afterwards they showered together and went to the dinning room for breakfast.

Ben had his usual: pancakes, omelet and sausage. Monique had a croissant with café crème.

—I'm going to miss you, Monique.

—I'm already dreading not being near you, darling.

—We should go, I don't want you to be late.

Traffic was the usual snarl. Ben parked in short-term parking and walked into the terminal with Monique. Alice and Esther were waiting near Passport Control.

—Well, was he a good boy? said Alice regarding Monique closely.

—He's the best man a woman could want.

—You look positively radiant, Monique, said Esther. He must have been good to you.

—Ben, I have to go, said Monique. Give me a big hug.

Ben was a little shy about embracing a uniformed stewardess in front of her fellow employees and a growing group of passengers, but Monique boldly pressed herself against him. Monique gave him a big generous kiss on the mouth. Nearby passengers gave a small round of applause. Ben blushed.

—Ben, I don't want any other woman's lipstick on your lips.

—Don't worry, Monique. You're my woman.

—I will call you when I arrive in New York. Don't forget to leave me your new number at Pan Am Ops.

—I will, and let me know when you return to Nice. The concert is in less than two weeks.

After she cleared Passport Control, Monique turned and waved . She blew him a kiss, turned and showed him her best rolling hips runway walk. Ben watched grinning with delight.

—That Monique, my woman, Ben said out loud.

To be continued