

Five Million Yen: Chapter 55

by Daniel Harris

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Part III

Zoë's divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian ("Double A" to his friends), sat at his desk in Los Angeles reading a copy of the *Hollywood Intelligencer*. The cover featured a photo of Zoë's estranged husband, Ben Clarone, with a shapely Pan Am stewardess. They were embracing in front of the Hotel Negresco in Nice, France. The banner headline screamed:

Z's Hubby In Dutch Stew

Aghajanian turned his attention to the article:

Musician Ben Clarone, the estranged husband of Zoë Bontemp, star of the hit TV series I'd Rather Not, was caught with glam Pan Am stew, Monique Zwaan, smooching in front of Nice's legendary Hotel Negresco. Heartbroken Zoë was distraught at this new infidelity. "He's such a bastard," Zoë told our reporter. Hubby, Ben Clarone, is a soloist with the Monte Carlo Orchestra this week. The Intelligencer's inside sources say French National police questioned Clarone about the death of Pan Am stewardess, Claudia Monschoud, found dead in a shower at the Ritz in Paris. Claudia Monschoud's husband, Dan Arris, told the Intelligencer: "Clarone murdered my wife." For Zoë, her real life was beginning to mirror her television role.

The photo had been heavily retouched so that the woman's skirt appeared to ride up to her underwear. The photo credit was Victor

Taxi, *Foto Clandestino*. Aghajanian knew from long experience with celebrity clients that disgruntled police informers often sold compromising photographs to the gossip rags. Victor Taxi was probably one of those despicable rogues.

—Mr. Aghajanian, I have Zoë Bontemps on the line 3, said his receptionist over the intercom.

—I wonder if she's looking at what I'm looking at? said Aghajanian laughing. Okay, I'll pick up.

—Hello Zoë, he said. To what do I owe the pleasure, my dear?

—Did you see the front page of the *Hollywood Intelligencer*? she said. I can't believe that clown let his picture be taken like that. The way Ben's holding her, the back of her skirt is at her panties, totally humiliating and embarrassing to me.

—Take it easy, Zoë. A photo and story like that are worth serious money in divorce court. I couldn't pay a private investigator to get a shot like that. This spread works in your favor.

—But when I arrived on the set this morning, it was all anyone talked about. I was so embarrassed. You can't see her face, but I'm sure she's a beauty. Ben always had a good eye for women.

—Zoë, I've been in the business over twenty years. There is no accounting for taste. Men think with their dicks, not their brains. The guy's been on the road for three months. He's probably horny as hell. For a guy who has been traveling for over three months, who better to hit on than an airline stewardess?

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Lieutenant Harold Smith, NYPD, looked at the front page of the *Hollywood Intelligencer*. Who is this woman, Monique Zwaan? he said out loud to no one in particular. Is she a girlfriend of Clarone's, or is she working for someone? If so, for whom? INTERPOL? French *Police judiciaire*? Dan Arris? Mulvihill, are you listening?

—Lieutenant Smith, you don't have to shout, I'm sitting at the next desk, said Detective-Sergeant Mulvihill.

—You see this woman, Monique Zwaan? said Smith. She's a Pan Am stewardess. I want you to find out everything about her. Find out her where she lives, her friends, her sex life and if she is working for a competing agency as a honey trap in the Arris/Clarone/Gringovitch case. Another thing. *No* uniformed police are to be involved in this. She's to remain ignorant that she's under surveillance. Capiche? Kid gloves. She's probably innocent, but I need to know for sure.

—Yes, sir. Kid gloves. Why's it losers like Clarone get all the babes?

—He's a hot property, said Smith, a musical star, handsome, and probably makes good coin.

—Lieutenant, said Mulvihill. Check out the photo credit. It's our old friend and amateur gumshoe Victor Taxi.

—I told INTERPOL to take that guy off the case, said Smith. I guess he's freelancing.

—Maybe he's working for Arris, said Mulvihill. Might figure, no?

—You might be on to something, Sergeant.

—Let's hope no one dies. Clarone has a track record of leaving dead women in hotels, said Mulvihill, returning to his stale donut and cold coffee.

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Ben pulled up in front of Hôtel Select in Beaulieu-sur-Mer. He had been staying there since last Tuesday. Jean-Claude had found a room that was very soundproof which would allow him to practice in his hotel without disturbing other guests. Michel, the owner, and Ben hit it off immediately. Most nights they played chess in the bar until closing while Ben waited futilly for a phone call from Monique and Michel tended a mostly empty bar. Carmen, Michel's wife, worked the reception desk during the day, but was asleep during Ben and Michel's hotly contested chess games.

—Bonjour, Carmen. How was your day? said Ben.

—Mezzo-mezzo, said Carmen shaking her head. How was yours? I see you have three cases with you today.

—Yes, the bane of woodwind players, too many cases. In addition to the concerto, I'm also playing the saxophone parts in Ravel's *Bolero* with the orchestra. Today was the only rehearsal of the Ravel.

—Ben, you have mail today, said Carmen. Two fat envelopes. She handed them to Ben.

—Merci, Madame. I hope they are good news. Any phone calls?

—Yes, there was one this morning after you left. It was from Monique Zwaan.

—Did she leave a message?

—She left a number, said Carmen, hoping to cheer Ben. She handed Ben the phone message.

Ben looked at his watch. It was five-thirty in France, so eleven-thirty a.m. in New York. He entered the phone cabine in the lobby of the hotel and called the number.

—Hullo? said a sleepy female voice.

—I'm looking for Monique Zwaan, said Ben

—She's asleep. Who is this?

—This is Ben Clarone, she has been calling me all week, but we haven't connected. Please put her on.

—Where are you?

—I'm at my hotel in France. said Ben.

—Give me your number. She will call you when she wakes up in a few hours. She is working a flight to Buenos Aires tonight.

—Can't I talk to her now?

—Does she have your number?

—I think so.

Click.

Ben redialed the number. He let it ring and ring. No answer.

—No luck? said Carmen.

—No, said a dejected Ben. They said she would call me here in a few hours.

—I had Jean carry your instruments up to your room, said Carmen. You look so sad, Ben.

—The heartbreaks of early courtship, said Ben unsuccessfully humoring himself.

Ben lay down on the bed and opened his mail. The letter was from Monique. Inside was a folded newspaper clipping. It was the front page of the *Hollywood Intelligencer*. There was the picture of Ben hugging and kissing Monique in front of the Negresco. The picture had been retouched so Monique's skirt was up to her panties in the back. At least her face was not visible in the photo.

A note card fell on the floor. Ben picked it up.

Ben Darling-

This is terrible! Have you been suffering from paparazzi like this since Zoë became famous? It is not a good omen for a peaceful public relationship for us. I hope my boss lady at Pan Am doesn't read this rag.

I miss you and am annoyed that you are never in your hotel when I telephone. I spoke with my supervisor about taking off the weekend of your concert, but he has been callously indifferent. I may have to take personal time and use my employee perks to fly to Nice. I so need to hear your voice.

I feel badly about being a brat at the Negresco. You were so sweet. I promise to make it up to you.

*I have to go. Love you. Sending you a big kiss and hug,
Monique*

Ben saw that Victor Taxi was credited with the photo. Victor, you are a sneaking low-life son-of-bitch, thought Ben. I wondered if Victor followed us to Marseille? No, the photo was when we were leaving the Negresco on Tuesday morning. Monique is in uniform. That's one more thing to worry about: *paparazzi*. Thank you Zoë, you bitch. First I support you when you couldn't make a dime, and now

that you're a rich star, you're suing me for a big divorce settlement and the Hollywood paparazzi are stalking me, putting stress on my relationship with Monique. God damn it. I hope Monique isn't too upset.

The other envelope had no return address. It had not been sent through the post, but hand-delivered. He opened it. A small brick of 500 FF notes wrapped in a stout rubber band fell on his chest. Under the rubber band was a hand written note:

Bring me two Gringovitch paintings and I'll double this.

Isabella S

Ben did a rapid count of the bills, fifty 500-franc notes, about \$5,000.

—Pretty small beer for a Gringovitch painting procurement fee, Isabella, said Ben out loud.

Tomorrow he would deposit the money in his Crédit Agricole account.

He took a shower and lay on the bed. He had a copy of Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, which he bought at the Nice-Côte d'Azur airport when he took Monique there last Tuesday morning. Bellow was perfectly mean to his faithful friend, Delmore Schwartz, Humboldt in the novel. Gringovitch had painted a wonderfully insightful painting of Delmore Schwartz sitting on a bench in Washington Square Park.

Ben fell asleep with the book on his chest. He was awakened by the telephone.

He lunged for the receiver.

—Hello?

—Ben, it's Monique.

—Finally.

There were a lot of clicks. On each click Ben thought he would be disconnected.

—Hello, Ben. Are you there?

—Monique, sweetheart. Is it really you?
—It's me, darling.
—I miss you so much.
—Me, too, Ben. Look, I can't talk long, I have to leave for the airport.
—Will you make it to my concert?
—I have to take time off, but I'll be there. Absolutely.
—Go to my telephone service. I will wire money to them and tell them to give you \$2000 for travel and glad rags.
—Ben, you don't have to do that, I have money.
—Monique, I *want* to do this for you. No arguments.
—Ben, I have to go. Okay, I'll pick up the money at your service.
Who do I see?
—Heather, at Musicians' Service. It's in the Brill Building, 1619 Broadway at 49th Street. Tell Heather what day and time you will arrive in Nice. I call them every day.
—They've put me on a South America flight tonight. I'll call you when I arrive in Buenos Aires. Let's see, today is Monday, I should be back in New York on Wednesday afternoon. I'll try to catch the flight to Nice Thursday. I've got to go.
—Love you. Be good and keep alert. Buenos Aires is dangerous these days.
—Love you, too, Ben. Please be careful.

There was a cascade of clicks and Monique was gone.

Ben lay on the bed mentally replaying the conversation with Monique. Maybe he was stupid about many things, but Monique was special. She was a keeper.

Ben knew he should eat. He dressed and went to the same restaurant he patronized since he arrived at Hôtel Select. He had goose with Italian truffles, roasted Brussels sprouts and potatoes. It was as close to a swan as he could get and good November fare. It was time to meet Michel for their nightly chess match. He knew

Michel was going to crush him. His mind was on Monique, not chess.

—Ben, did the man from Selmer find you last week? said Michel, taking one of Ben's pawns.

—Yes, he did. That was Georges Selmer, the president of the company in Paris. He found me at the orchestra rehearsal. Jean-Claude, the orchestra manager, and Hans Hausenstockman, the composer of the concerto, called Selmer and told them what happened to my contrabass. Georges brought me a new contrabass to use while they refurbished my instrument. It was just luck that they had one at the factory. They make them only to order.

—That's petty generous, said Michel. Will you use the loaner for the concert?

—Probably. I don't think they can finish mine in time. They have to make new keys. I should have my trusted customized instrument back for the recording sessions.

—It is one strange instrument, Ben, said Michel, dragging on his meerschaum.

—Not to everyone's taste, for sure, said Ben.

Ben spotted a weakness in Michel's position and worked a checkmate in five moves.

—Ben, I can't believe you beat me. That makes the score tonight three apiece. One last game? Or quit?

—One more, said Ben, gloating over his triumph.

Ben laid out the board while Michel served a late customer.

—Carmen tells me you had two more instruments today, said Michel, seating himself at the chess table. Are you setting up a music shop?

—No, said Ben, laughing. I'm playing the saxophone parts for Ravel's *Bolero*. I borrowed those two instruments from Arno Donax, the musician who was supposed to play the concerto. He was badly injured in a motorcycle accident.

—I remember reading about that. How is he?

—Much better, but he will be in hospital for another month or more and then a long rehabilitation process.

—Will he perform again? said Michel taking one of Ben's bishops. We used to see his name advertised on concert posters.

—Bad move, Michel, said Ben. Well, hard to say about Arno. His left hand was crushed, his left forearm broken in four places, which is minor, compared to the serious head injuries. Ben snared Michel's queen with a rook.

—I think you got me, said Michel.

—I see mate in three moves and checkmate in four, said Ben, quietly thanking the luck of the swan.

—I resign, said Michel. It's after midnight and I have to deal with the elevator inspector tomorrow morning.

—Good night, Michel. Thank you for the games and the pastis.

—My pleasure. Good night, Ben.

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Ben wished Monique were in his bed, but he had to keep those thoughts out of his head. He was happy she would be at his concert. He couldn't imagine her in Buenos Aires. He had been there in August as part of the global tour. It was the nadir of the tour. Isabel Martínez de Perón had been overthrown five months before and the country was under military siege. What was he doing playing weird new music in such a dangerous place? He hoped Monique would be safe. There was a lot of anti-American sentiment there. And even though she was Dutch, she worked for an American company. Well, he thought, winning chess games was good luck. Monique was good luck. Don't worry. He fell asleep remembering Monique's fine long fingers stroking his chest and the intoxicating perfume of her hair on his cheek.

To be continued.

