

Five Million Yen: Chapter 56

by Daniel Harris

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Ben Clarone and Gabe Benjamin met for dinner in Nice at Le Crustacé. They had not seen each other for over a week. Gabe had been in Milan auditioning women for bit parts in a movie about Formula One race car drivers. Ben had daily rehearsals with the Monte Carlo Orchestra and with Serge Nobokolov, his co-soloist. The premiere was Saturday evening, three days away.

—I can't believe someone threw your contrabass from a window, said Gabe.

—Yeah, it was crazy, said Ben. The person who did it was the son of the housekeeper at the rue de Paris flat. His name is Antonini Cattivino, a violinist in the Monte Carlo Orchestra. He's a complete whacko. Before the first rehearsal, he complained about Hausenstockmann's piece. At the first rehearsal he spit on my horn, and tried to knock it off its stand. At a meeting on rebellious players, the orchestra board removed him from the orchestra playing the Hausenstockmann. He stole his mother's key, let himself into my apartment, and threw my rare instrument out the window.

—Sounds like a nut job. But what was Victor Taxi doing in your crib? What was his role?

—He was on a mission for Dan Arris. I had of one of Gringovitch's paintings hanging in the den. On the advice of Inspector Lilly Rose, I put the painting in a bank vault. Victor was after that painting.

—How could a world-class musician get so involved in international art dealings?

—Thank Anatoly Gringovitch. I'm only here to deliver two paintings and play a gig.

—So, where are the paintings now?

—I have the Gorky original and oil copies of two Gringovitch paintings in a vault at Credit Suisse in Nice.

—So, what does that mean?

—It means that Isabella Sanitizzare and Dan Arris want the paintings and will do anything to get them. I mean *anything*. All the paintings I have belong to Gringovitch. One of Dan Arris's copies is at Découvrir Art in Marseille. Gringovitch has the other one.

—I still don't understand.

—Well, said Ben, here is the deal, but remember you never heard it from me.

—My lips are sealed.

—There are six paintings involved. The main one is an Arshile Gorky painting called *The Unfaithful Wife*. Dan Arris made two copies of that painting. Gringovitch covered those two copies and the original with an original Gringovitch painting done in cheap student gouache. That was to throw off customs and tax people. There was a mix up. I accidentally received the original of *The Unfaithful Wife*. I had copies made of the over paintings of the two I brought from New York. In my bank vault is the real Gorky, plus the copies of the two original Gringovitch paintings. Our friend...well, maybe our friend...Isabella Sanitizzare wants all of them. The Gorky is worth millions, the Gringovitch paintings about half a mil each. If Isabella is the dealer, it could be worth more than a million dollars for her. Isabella is out to somehow convince me to convince Gringovitch that it is in his best interest for her to serve as Gringovitch's dealer in France.

—Exactly.

—There's more. The two forgeries of the Gorky had a purpose. One was to be sold to a rich Armenian and the other was to hang in Yolande's café, where over time the gouache would come off revealing the Gorky painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*. Now that ruse

will never happen since Yolande's was bombed. Basically, Arris was trying to sell the same painting three times!

—Wow! Some kind of guy, said Gabe.

—It gets worse, said Ben

—My girlfriend, Monique Zwann, had a serious set-to with Isabella in the rue de Paris crib. So now not only is Isabella after me to avenge Monique's attack, but she needs to curry my favor to lobby Gringovitch to take her on as his dealer in France.

—Is that the Dutch stewardess on the flight from JFK?

—The very same. I love that woman.

—Aren't you being a trifle premature?

—No, we spent last weekend together. It works. I love her and she adores me. Unfortunately she's had to work a flight to Buenos Aires. I'm totally distracted until I hear from her later tonight that she is back in New York.

—That's not good. The government troops have cracked down on foreigners. She could be in jail, dead or as they say, "disappeared."

—Do you have to tell me these things? I'm already fearful for her safety. I was there six weeks ago and it was brutal. Bullet holes in walls everywhere. There were people disappearing, or being found shot in the back of the head on the street. It was terrible.

—Sorry bro, just being realistic.

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Isabella Sanitizzare and her grandmother, Ida Oates, entered the restaurant. Isabella spotted Ben at once, ignored the *maître d'*, and walked directly to Ben and Gabe's table.

—Ben, so good to see you, said Isabella.

—Likewise, said Ben, trying to overcome his surprise.

—Aren't you Gabriel Benjamin? said Isabella to Gabe.

—The very same, said Gabe, his eyeballs popping at Isabella's braless cleavage.

—Well, I think you both know my grandmother, Ida Oates, Miss Idaho a few years ago.

—Decades, not years, dear Isabella, said Ida. Ida's ample bosom was also on prominent display.

—Yes, the charming and gorgeous Ida. How could I forget, said Ben.

—Ah, Ben, you know how to flatter women. You must be a pro with airline stewardesses with all the traveling you do.

—I strike out a lot, said Ben.

—I think I know the feeling of a strike, said Isabella sarcastically.

—It's rumored you met your match, said Ben, joyful in the thought of tough little Monique ramming Isabella's head into a door jam.

The *maitre d'* asked Isabella if they wanted a table.

—May we join you? said Isabella.

—Sure, set two more places and bring another bottle of wine, said Gabe to the *maitre d'*.

—Forget the wine, said Isabella, bring a bottle of your best champagne, my treat.

—I gather you've met Monique, said Ben to Isabella.

—Trust me, Ben, it won't happen again. Your friend and I will never again be in the same room together.

—You jest, said Ben.

—She will never leave Buenos Aires, said Isabella. You gave her your last kiss.

—Really? How can you be so certain?

—One of my former clients is a member of the military junta.

Ben's heart sank and he felt a quickening in his gut. Isabella *was* the viper lady every one warned him about. What other tricks did she have up her sleeve?

There was an amusing vaudevillian comedy of errors as two more chairs were added to the table and places set and reset. Isabella sat next to Gabe. Ida sat across from Ben.

—Would you like us to delay serving your meal so you can dine with the ladies? said the *maitre d'* to Gabe.

—That would be preferred, said Gabe.

Ben was in a complete hopeless funk, having heard Isabella's prediction of Monique's destiny.

—Cheer up, Ben, said Isabella. The police rarely kill the women. They serially rape them. There is almost a certain chance of venereal disease. Imagine, twenty, thirty men in less than an hour. Public, brutal and barbaric, but it occurs on the streets daily. Husbands and boyfriends who witness the rapes are usually castrated and shot in front of their violated wives and girlfriends. Ben, I don't think you would want to mount you white charger and ride to the rescue.

— Isabella, you should censor your mouth, said Ida. Not exactly table talk

—You're correct. Ida. I apologize Ben, but it's inevitable. Most of the men they send on those missions have multiple venereal diseases. Sweet Monique is lost to you.

Ben looked at the champagne bubbles and felt dizzy with fear. He had no appetite.

—Let's talk about something else, said Ben.

—Gabe, how's the movie business? said Isabella.

—*Film*, said Gabe, correcting Isabella. We call it the *film* business when you are on the shooting and editing end of the chain. Movie business is the marketing and legal guys.

—Since we are sitting in France, shouldn't it properly be called cinema? said Ida. —What is the film about? said Isabella.

—A Formula One race driver, said Gabe. The film takes place on the Côte d'Azur and at the *Autodromo Nazionale Monza* in Monza, Italy. I returned from Milan where I auditioned extras and bit-part actors, mostly young women. Formula One drivers have a history of beautiful and intelligent wives, mistresses and girlfriends. It was a pleasant week among some of Italy's finest looking female actresses.

—Don't they usually have some women on the auditioning committee? said Ida.

—They sure did. I was the only male. Women are brutal with each other, but I think they picked the best. There were over two hundred women. Italy has an abundance of beautiful young women.

Ben looked at his watch for the tenth time in five minutes. It was still not nine o'clock, three in the afternoon in New York. If Monique were on the return flight, she should be landing soon.

—Ben, you seem preoccupied and nervous as a cat with a snake, said Isabella. I apologize for being rude, but your friend Monique packs a mean shove. I still have a lump on the top of my head.

—Well, I am worried. I was in Buenos Aires six weeks ago, and know how difficult it is. Secret police, armed troops, police are everywhere.

—Ben, have you heard from Gringovitch? Isn't he coming for your concert? said Isabella.

—Yes. He said he would arrive from Rome on Friday afternoon and see me after the concert. He's bringing his wife and two of his children. I had to get two more tickets for the sons.

—Do you know where he's staying?

—He didn't tell me, said Ben. I guess he wants to keep a low profile since he's with his family.

—What are your plans after the concert? said Ida.

—There is a big reception at one of the hotels. I can't remember which one.

Every one who has artist's comps is invited to the reception.

—Well, Ida and I will see you at the reception. We have comps from Maestro Marcevicz. He is a longtime client.

—That's very special, said Ben. (How connected is this bitch, thought Ben.)

—Gabe, do you have a comp? If not, I can get you one, said Isabella.

—Thanks, Isabella, but Ben gave me one. It will be interesting to compare classical music highbrow receptions with film award receptions.

—I thought you might want a female escort for the event, said Isabella.

—Isabella, I was hoping I could be *your* date, said Gabe taking a big slug of his champagne.

—Can you handle a threesome? said Isabella.

Gabe choked on his champagne.

—Excuse me, he said, wiping champagne from his face. I accidentally inhaled the champagne. Ah...what threesome?

—Why, Ida, you, and me, said Isabella.

—I could be the proudest man at the concert and reception, said Gabe.

—The night doesn't end with the reception, said Ida, winking at Gabe.

(Could I end up in bed with these two broads, thought Gabe. What would Ida's role be? He could feel himself blushing. Two babes. Clarone must be crying in his champagne. Hah! Lucky me.)

The food was excellent, but Ben was in no mood for dining, especially with Isabella, the viper lady, trying to terrorize him. He excused himself, asked to use the restaurant house phone, and telephoned his hotel.

Carmen, the co-owner of Hotel Select, answered the phone.

—Hotel Select, Beaulieu-sur-Mer, how may I help you?

—Carmen, it's Ben Clarone. Did you receive any calls from Monique?

—No, Ben, but we did receive a cable for you. Should I open it and read it to you?

—Yes, please.

Ben could hear Carmen opening an envelope.

—Ben, are you there?

—Yes.

BEN STOP BIG TROUBLE BA STOP ARRIVED RIO STOP ARRIVE PARIS THURSDAY STOP WILL CALL FROM PARIS STOP. SEE YOU NICE. STOP. I AM SAFE. STOP LOVE YOU STOP MONIQUE.

—Sounds like she had some trouble. Where is B.A., said Carmen.

—Buenos Aires, Argentina, said Ben. There is big trouble there.

—She sounds safe, so don't worry, Ben.

—Thank you, Carmen. I'm still worried.

—We are like family for you, Ben. Anything you need, we are here for you.

—Thank you, Carmen. Leave the cable in my mailbox.

—Of course. Have a good dinner.

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It was midnight Tuesday when the Pan Am flight to Buenos Aires landed at the Ministro Pistarini International Airport in Buenos Aires. The airport seemed calm, but there was a heavy police and military presence. As the passengers filed out of the aircraft, the Captain went to each crewmember and told them that they had to stay on the airplane. If they entered the airport they would be subject to arrest and questioning by the police. He had been strongly advised to leave Pistarini ASAP and fly to Rio de Janeiro, where he would refuel and return to New York.

Monique was in a panic. She wanted to be in Nice by Friday to buy a gown for Ben's premiere. Now her plans seemed dashed.

—Will Pan Am crewmember, Monique Zwaan, please come to the police help desk, said a voice over the airport public address system in English.

—Is that real? said Monique. It sounds wrong. They can just stop me at Passport Control.

—I wouldn't go, said Vicki, a fellow crewmember.

—Monique, I would not leave this aircraft. It is a small piece of America. If you go into the airport, we cannot help you, said the captain. Headquarters instructed me to leave for Rio ASAP. There will be no relief crew. They are in the American embassy while negotiations continue. There is a government action against America citizens. Pan Am is a special target.

—But I'm Dutch, said Monique.

—Well, you're working for an American company, Monique, said the captain.

Two women in ill-fitting cheap suits entered the aircraft.

—We are CIA, said the two women in unison, flashing ID's. We are looking for Monique Zwaan. She must be protected. There is a local warrant for her arrest.

The captain suspected that these were not *bona fide* CIA operatives. He and the flight engineer took the two women to the rear of the aircraft and shoved them into a toilet locking the door

The aircraft boarded passengers for New York. Many of them had no luggage. They were refugees. The tug pushed back the Pan Am flight. They headed toward the taxi area assuming their place in the take-off queue. When their turn came to take-off, the tower interrupted and told them to abort take-off.

—Of course, said Captain Jack Cunningham, as he pushed the throttles to full power. Fuel would be tight to Rio, but leaving Buenos Aires was his top priority.

—We will be refueling in Rio de Janeiro in three hours, said the flight engineer over the P.A. You will have to exit the aircraft and wait in the transit lounge while the aircraft is refueled and cleaned. We estimate a one-hour or two hour layover in Rio. We are sorry for the inconvenience. All beverages will be free on this and the continuing flight.

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While Monique waited in Rio for the Air France Rio-Dakar-Paris flight, she sent a cable to Ben in Beaulieu-sur-Mer. She was not going to be a pretty sight when she arrived in Nice. All she had were two flight uniforms in need of cleaning and one clean change of underwear. Poor Ben was going to see her at her worst. Because her funds were low, she had borrowed a hundred dollars from Captain Cunningham. She might have to pay full plane or train fare from Paris to Nice. She wished she had gone to Ben's telephone service in Manhattan and gotten the two thousand dollars. She just didn't have time.

For the concert and reception, Ben would have to buy her a gown in Nice or Monte Carlo. She hoped they would still have a

relationship after all this. She thought of poor Ben and all the travails he had been through in the last few months. He took adversity well and he always seemed cheerful. That's what she loved most about him. But first she had to get to Nice before Saturday evening's concert.

To be continued.

