

Five Million Yen: Chapter 57

by Daniel Harris

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Arno Aghajanian, Zoë's divorce lawyer, hung up the phone. He had been talking to Dan Arris about Aghajanian's pending purchase of Arshile Gorky's last painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*.

Arris had proposed that they meet in Monaco. They could attend Ben Clarone's performance of Hans Hausenstockmann's *Constellations*, for string contrabass, contrabass clarinet and orchestra. Sometime that weekend, they would meet to arrange the transfer of funds and the painting. Anatoly Gringovitch, who actually owned the Gorky painting, would be there as well. The funds would be transferred between Aghajanian's and Arris's Swiss bank accounts. The agreed upon price was \$1,250,000. Aghajanian knew he could resell the painting for more than two million if he put it up for auction. It was a win-win situation. Additionally, he could serve Ben Clarone with a subpoena to answer charges for his divorce from Zoë Bontemps. It should rattle the bastard, causing him to give a bad performance and sully his vaunted reputation.

Zoë Bontemps was in New York promoting her television series, *I'd Rather Not*. Aghajanian called the Waldorf and left a message for Zoë. He would take the red eye to NYC that night and together they would fly to Nice on Thursday on Pan Am flight 82.

—Mr. Aghajanian there is an Isabella Sanitizzare on line three, said the receptionist over the intercom. She claims she is the art dealer working for Dan Arris.

—I'll take it.

Arno moved to the couch in his office and picked up the extension.

—Yes, Ms. Sanitizzare, Arno Aghajanian here. What can I do for you?

—I am the art dealer for Dan Arris in the matter of the sale of the Gorky painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*. There is some contract information you should have and papers you will need to sign. My fees are deducted from the selling price and do not in any way increase your costs. When can we meet to complete this paperwork?

—I will be arriving in Nice on Friday morning, said Aghajanian, we can meet you at your office at that time.

—Perhaps we can have lunch on Friday, said Isabella. It will be my pleasure to host you. We can take care of the paperwork after the meal.

—I will have my client, Zoë Bontemps with me, said Aghajanian. She is a major television star in America.

—Isn't she Ben Clarone's wife?

—*Estranged* wife. I'm her divorce lawyer. Zoë intends to make Mr. Clarone as uncomfortable as possible.

—Ah, Clarone will have more than he bargained for this weekend.

—I hope to make him as miserable as possible for all that he has done to Zoë, said Arno Aghajanian.

—There's no love lost between Ben Clarone and myself, said Isabella, or his girlfriend, Monique Zwaan.

—Is that the woman in the photo embracing him in front of the Negresco? said Aghajanian.

—Yes, she's a Pan Am stewardess, that special breed of international slut, said Isabella.

—Yes, they carry that reputation in the States, said Aghajanian. What is your role? I thought Arris was the dealer.

—He's the agent for the owner, but the owner, Anatoly Gringovitch, is an artist in my stable of painters in France. Arris asked me to handle the paperwork since I have a tax-advantaged status. As usual, it's about the money.

—My money, of course.

—Yes, but you will become the owner of a classic 20th-century painting with a back-story that is unique. I should advise you that the price is below what I would put on it. It is worth over two million. You have a great deal.

—I hope so.

—When will you arrive in Nice?

—I'm arriving on Pan Am flight 82 from JFK on Friday morning.

—I will meet you and Zoë at the airport.

—How will I know you?

—I'll be the most desirable woman there.

Click.

Arno's interest in Isabella Sanitizzare was suddenly piqued.

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Monique was exhausted. The flight from Rio to Dakar was pleasant, but the flight was full from Dakar to Paris. She had to sit on a jump seat most of the way, though she managed to bunk for four hours in the crew's quarters. When she arrived in Paris she booked a flight to Nice, but had to cross Paris to Orly for the flight. She called Ben's hotel from Charles De Gaulle airport.

— Hôtel Select Beaulieu-sur-Mer, said Carmen.

—This is Monique Zwaan. I would like to speak with one of your guests, Monsieur Ben Clarone.

—I'm sorry Monique, but Ben is in rehearsal in Monte Carlo. May I take a message?

—Yes. Tell Ben that I'm in Paris and will arrive in Nice from Orly Ouest at nine tonight. If he can meet me, that would be perfect. If not I need your address.

—Tell the cab driver, Hôtel Select, Beaulieu-sur-Mer. I think Ben has a rehearsal tonight until ten.

—I so hoped Ben could meet me. How disappointing. But thank you Carmen.

—Ben will be so happy to see you. He has been bursting with anticipation knowing you would be here for his concert.

—Me, too. But, I must fly. The bus is leaving for Orly *tout suite*.
Merci, au revoir.

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Isabella was sitting at an outside table at *Trois Frères Café* smoking. Isabella was waiting for Leona Koshka, the director of the *Musée d'Art Contemporain* (MAC), currently housed at Villa Arson. Leona had recommended the café because of its excellent lunch menu, and it was a few short blocks from Villa Arson. Isabella saw Leona walking toward the café, and stood to greet her.

Leona was a statuesque chain-smoking woman in her late thirties with prematurely gray hair that she piled high on her head giving her six-foot frame a crown that topped most men. Her grandparents had fled to Paris at the start of the Russian Revolution in 1917. The family's extensive personal art collection of Impressionist and early-twentieth-century art had been the basis for their successful art gallery. All was lost when the Nazi's marched into Paris, June 14, 1940. SS officers confiscated the art works in the gallery and imprisoned Leona's parents, who perished in a German prison camp. Leona, who was two at the time, had been sent to the home of one of the gallery's clients in Switzerland. Leona stayed in Switzerland after the war, graduating with a degree in international law from the University of Geneva in 1963. She moved to Paris and enrolled in the Sorbonne taking a degree in art history. While at the Sorbonne she worked as an intern at the Louvre in the acquisitions department, where she was hired upon completing her degree. When the position of director for MAC was open, the board of directors immediately sought her out and hired her. Her acumen in identifying important contemporary art works had significantly improved the status and reputation of the Louvre's contemporary art holdings.

Isabella wore loose revealing clothing. Leona was covered from neck to ankle with stylish, but unrevealing clothing. Her statuesque

proportions were hidden in a full skirt and loose sweater, covered by an expensive hand-embroidered shawl.

—Leona, I love that shawl you are wearing, said Isabella. So stylish and the embroidery is amazingly detailed.

—Thank you, Isabella. My husband bought it in Rome last week. It's hand-woven silk

—It is *so* smooth, said Isabella, feeling the scarf between her fingers.

—Very warm, also.

—Isn't you husband, Marcello Metronomini, the orchestra conductor? said Isabella.

—Yes. We will have been married ten years tomorrow.

Unfortunately, he's in Boston, rehearsing Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. We had hoped to celebrate in Boston, but when you told me Gringovitch was going to attend his friend's performances with the Monte Carlo Orchestra, I cancelled those plans. I'll catch up with Marcello for his performances in two weeks.

—Ah, Madame Koshka, so pleased to see you again, said the maitre 'd.

—Louis, this is my friend, Isabella Sanitizzare. She is a major art dealer. Isabella, Louis is one of the three brothers who own this café.

—*Enchante*, Madame, said Louis with a small bow. I highly recommend today's *menu*. The soup is a cream of wild mushroom, the entrée is wild pheasant and the vegetable is roasted Brussels sprouts. May I suggest the Côte du Rhone rosé.

—That sounds excellent, said Leona, but I think we would prefer the Sancerre.

—Very well.

Louis turned the wine glasses upright and left to fetch bread and the wine.

—Alain, the brother who cooks, is superb, Isabella, said Leona, This restaurant is a hidden gem.

—Speaking of gems, said Isabella, I have asked Ben Clarone to meet us this afternoon at his bank. He has two Gringovitch paintings that he can show us.

—Why are they at a bank? Does the bank own the paintings?

—No, Ben Clarone has them in a safe deposit vault. He lives in New York, but he brought the paintings to Nice for his friend Anatoly Gringovitch. Apparently they grew up together in Chicago and Gringovitch trusts Clarone.

—I would like that. Do you know if they are recent?

—I think they are very recent, said Isabella. Clarone said they were still not completely dry. I haven't seen them yet, so it will all be new for me, too.

—What time did you say we would meet him?

—Two-thirty at Credit Suisse on Avenue Jean Medecin.

—Good, I hate to rush lunch. It is the only meal Marcello and I ever have together when he is home.

The meal was superb. The soup was flavorful without being filling and the pheasant was superbly prepared. The presentation was first rate.

—Was the meal satisfactory? said Louis, as he cleared the table.

—Excellent, said the women in unison.

—Perhaps a small dessert? said Louis.

—None for me, said Leona, but a double espresso please. Isabella, would you care for dessert?

—A café Americano.

—As you wish, said Louis.

Both women took out cigarettes. Leona lit Isabella's Marlboro and her own Gauloises from the same match.

Isabella stubbed out her Marlboro.

—Leona, can I have one of your Gauloises?

—Certainly. Leona shook a cigarette from her pack and offered it to Isabella. She then lit a match by folding over a match and striking it and offering it to Isabella.

—Leona, you know I once saw the whole matchbook go up in flames when someone lit a match like that.

—Yes, said Leona, but I have years of practice and I don't litter the ground with burned out sticks of cardboard.

Louis returned with the coffees and a small chocolate mousse with two large spoons.

—A gift of the house, said Louis.

—Oh, you shouldn't have, said Leona. Do I look like I need a dessert?

—Madame Koshka, chocolate is good for the soul and the spirit. This small amount is hardly contraindicated.

The two women laughed at his sincerity and the use of the word contraindicated.

—Thank you Louis, said Isabella. Our compliments to you and your brothers.

—Beautiful women enhance a restaurant's reputation, said Louis.

—Flattery will get you everywhere, said Isabella.

While Isabella used the lady's room, Leona paid the bill.

—I thought it was my treat, said Isabella when she returned.

—Next time, said Leona, when I have purchased a painting or two. Is Mr. Clarone a "lady's man," as you say in America?

—Absolutely.

—Perhaps I should change into different clothes, said Leona.

—Wouldn't you have to drive to Monaco to your home?

—No, I have several changes of clothes in my office, said Leona. You can view the galleries while I change. Then we can drive to the meet Mr. Clarone.

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—Christ all mighty, said Ben to himself as he watched Isabella and Leona enter the bank. Those are some extraordinary examples of female flesh. Even though he was wary of Isabella, he had to admit that she was one fine specimen. The woman with her was less refined, but equally stunning in a low cut sheath dress. Both were dressed showing plenty of bosom and leg.

Isabella walked up to Ben and gave him a light hug and a kiss on the cheek. Ben could feel her braless breasts just touching his chest.

—Ben, meet my good friend Leona Koshka. She is the director of the *Musée d'Art contemporain* here in Nice. Leona, this is Ben Clarone, musician *extraordinaire*.

—Pleased to meet you, said Leona, shaking Ben's extended hand. My husband has nothing but glowing words about your musicianship,

—Who is your husband, may I ask, said Ben slightly overwhelmed by the two powerful women and their reference to his professionalism.

—The conductor Marcello Metronomini, said Leona with pride.

—I have never performed with him, said Ben, but he has a reputation as a musician's musician.

—He is scheduled to conduct the Concertgebouw orchestra a year from next spring. He has programmed Hausenstockmann's *Constellations*. I'm sure Marcello will see that they engage you as one of the soloists.

—I'm not so sure. The Dutch have a bountiful supply of extraordinary bass clarinetists.

—My husband *always* gets his way.

A bank official came up to them and showed them to a room in the vault area.

—Mr. Clarone, said the official, you can bring your items securely into this room. We have placed two easels in the room for your convenience.

—Thank you.

Ben followed the official to his vault.

—If you use the same route we just used, you will have complete privacy and security, Mr. Clarone.

—Thank you.

Ben brought the two paintings into the viewing room and put them on the easels.

Leona expertly adjusted the angle of the easels so that the light did not cause shadows or reflections.

—This is brilliant, said Leona, pointing to one of the paintings.

—Gringovitch calls it *The Black and The Red*, said Ben. I think it refers to the battle of the ants in Thoreau's *Walden*. The other painting is titled *Abstract with Yellow*.

—May I take a photograph of them?

—I'd rather you didn't. Anatoly mentioned he might want to do some more work on them.

—Yes, I can respect that, said Leona.

—Ben, are these all the paintings you have? asked Isabella.

—Yes, but Gringovitch is bringing more from Rome. He will arrive tomorrow.

—I meant, do you have paintings by other artists?

—No, I only brought these two Gringovitch paintings from Brooklyn.

—Dan Arris told me that you also had a Gorky painting, said Isabella.

—Gorky?

—Yes, Arshile Gorky, the Armenian-American painter.

—No, I have the customs slips, if you care to see them. They show two paintings by Anatoly Gringovitch valued at \$1,000 each.

—Well, I was misinformed, then, said Isabella.

—I would be very interested if you had a Gorky, said Leona.

—Sorry to disappoint two beautiful women, but this is all I have, said Ben. He winked at both women. I'm beg your pardon, but I must return to Monte Carlo for rehearsals. I'm sure you can negotiate with Gringovitch tomorrow.

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When Isabella arrived home after the meeting at Ben Clarone's bank, she telephoned Dan Arris.

—Dan, I told Arno Aghajanian that I was the agent for the *Unfaithful Wife*. He knows you are the art dealer.

—The transfer goes into my Swiss bank account, said Arris. You'll get your ten per cent, which is all you deserve since you haven't solved the Clarone problem.

—Dan, that's not fair. How did I know he would have a girlfriend who was a martial arts specialist?

—You were supposed to seduce him, Isabella, not fight with his girlfriend.

—It was all messed up because of the cleaning lady and her psychotic son.

—Ida told me Clarone was practically drooling over you when you drove him and Gabe Benjamin from the airport. Sounds pretty easy to me.

—Things happened. Now he won't come near me.

—Fix it or you get cut out of any further deals.

—Dan, be fair, said Isabella. Clarone won't come near me.

—He will when Monique doesn't show up for his concert, said Arris. Be prepared. It's the Boy Scout motto.

* * *

Monique looked for Ben in the gaggle of people waiting for loved ones and business associates at the arrivals gate. He was not there.

—Monique Zwaan?

—Yes, said Monique.

—I am Victor Taxi. Ben Clarone sent me to take you to his hotel.

—Oh, thank you. I was hoping he would be here, but I guess he is too busy.

—You can trust me, said Victor. Monsieur Clarone and I have a long relationship.

It was the same taxi driver who drove her after the fight with Isabella Sanitizzare.

As Monique slid into the rear seat of Victor Taxi's cab, a gloved hand clapped a roll of gauze bandage soaked in ether over her mouth and nose. Two other hands pulled her on her back onto the floor of the car. The two men bound her hands and feet with duct tape.

To be continued.

