

Five Million Yen: Chapter 58

by Daniel Harris

Click on my name above. It will take you to my home page where you will find links to more stories and other chapters of "Five Million Yen".

* * *

Anatoly Gringovitch was listening to the dress rehearsal of Hausenstockmann's *Constellations* at Auditorium Rainier III in Monte Carlo. There was something wrong with his friend Ben Clarone. He was playing the part perfectly, but the usual élan that Ben brought to a performance was missing. It was Ben on mechanical autopilot. What was wrong with Ben?

—Monsieur Gringovitch? said a young man dressed in a t-shirt and blue jeans.

—*Oui?*

—There is a Monsieur Dan Arris on the telephone for you at the ticket office.

—*Merci.*

Gringovitch followed the young man to the ticket office. The woman handling the ticket sales showed him the telephone.

—Arris?

—Anatoly, I am meeting Arno Aghajanian, the buyer of the Gorky tonight.

—So? How am I involved?

—I will need the Gorky painting to show him.

—I have engagements tonight that I must attend.

—Will you give it to my assistant, Isabella Sanitizarre?

—Can we trust her?

—She is committed because she is receiving a commission and she wants to be your dealer in France. She has a buyer lined up for two paintings of yours that Clarone showed her yesterday.

—You know she is a duplicitous viper and not to be trusted.

—Yes, but I have people who will be driving her to your hotel and to the meeting with the buyer. I trust them explicitly *and* I will be at that meeting. The Gorky painting will be in my possession from the moment she arrives at the meeting.

—I don't get a warm fuzzy feeling about this, Arris. She has too many arrows in her quiver.

—Anatoly, I know how to handle women like her.

—All right. I will meet Isabella at the lobby of my hotel, the Regal, at six tonight.

—No, five-thirty, the meeting with the buyer is at six.

—Okay. Five-thirty.

—Assuming no problems, your Swiss bank account will be three-quarters of a million dollars fatter next week, Anatoly.

—It better be, Arris. I will expect a notarized receipt of the transfer.

Gringovitch returned to the dress rehearsal. When he entered, there was a discussion about issues with Salvatore Anello's projections. Evidently there was a timing problem. Igor Marcevicz, the conductor, was unhappy that the technical people were not following him. They were using a stopwatch to time their changes, not cues from him. A break was called to resolve the issues.

Gringovitch joined Ben on stage.

—Ben, what's going on? You don't seem to be here. Are you sick?

—Anatoly, there is a big problem.

—Now what?

—My girlfriend, Monique Zwaan, was supposed to arrive last night. I had to rehearse late and could not meet her at the airport. She took a cab, but she never arrived at my hotel. I am worried that someone has abducted her.

—What makes you think that?

—It's not like her to miss an appointment. She's scrupulously Dutch.

—Wake up, Ben. You know women are notoriously unreliable when it comes to affairs of the heart. They love nothing better than to play girl games to keep you guessing.

—But she flew from Buenos Aires to Nice to be at the concert. She was going to buy a dress today and then get beautified at some chic Monte Carlo salon.

—What makes you think she was abducted?

—She was in a fight with Isabella Sanitizzare a week ago.

—A *fight*?

—Yeah, a real head banger, punches and all.

—I love women fighting. Remember when we would go to the Chicago Stadium and watch roller derby? Those skaters would devolve into veritable Amazons.

—Well, those babes were paid to fight. In this case it is about possession of art and me. I have two of your paintings and the Gorky. I think Isabella or Arris want bargaining power to get those paintings and are holding Monique hostage so I won't renege on the proposed deal.

—Let me think about this, Ben.

Gringovitch folded his arms over his chest and stared off into the empty cavern of the concert hall. He started pacing in a small circle.

Okay, he said, turning to Ben, here's the deal. Because of my screw up, you have the real Gorky and I have one of Arris's copies. Only you, I, and Arris know the difference between the two copies and the original.

—That's correct, said Ben, but I told Isabella and her client, Lena Koshka, that I only had *your* paintings. I didn't mention that I had a Gorky, original or copy, though Isabella asked if I had any other paintings. I suspect Arris might have told her he thought I had a Gorky copy.

—Yes, said Gringovitch, but it is a Gorky copy that is at stake tonight, not the original and valuable Gorky. Arris is meeting with the buyer. I never told Arris about my error. You ended up with the original and I ended up with a copy. If you really believe that Arris or Sanitizzare had your girlfriend ... sorry, what's her name again?

—Monique Zwann.

—...If they really had Monique kidnapped, then here's what we must do. I will give Sanitizzare my copy. Arris may, or may not, recognize it as one of his copies. If he does, he will probably suspect Sanitizzare of double-crossing him. Of course, that might put you at risk, or perhaps me. We know Arris is aware you showed Dente's copies of my paintings to Sanitizzare. He mentioned it when he telephoned me a few minutes ago.

—So?

—Okay, this is the gambit: We send Isabella Sanitizzare to the meeting with the copy of the Gorky. We'll see what plays out. Knowing what a hothead Arris is, he will probably accuse Isabella of double-crossing him after the buyer leaves with the forgery. He'll suspect her, and that will throw suspicion off of you. I will make a deal with them that will swap Monique for those copies of my paintings. Don't forget the originals no longer exist and those paintings will not be worth what Isabella thinks they are worth.

—But what if we're wrong? said Ben. What if Isabella doesn't know Monique is kidnapped? Arris could hold Monique, or worse hurt her. I still suspect Arris killed Claudia, his wife or ex-wife, because he thought she and I were double-dealing him.

—If Arris *did* kill Claudia, then he is dumber than I thought. When he's a hot head, he's dangerous.

—Well, I still have a shiner where he socked me in a taxi in Paris, said Ben removing his sunglasses.

—Nice one, Ben. Did you put raw beefsteak on it?

—No, horsemeat, works faster.

—Ah, Ben, you know that joke, said Gringovitch laughing.

Ben nervously fingered a passage from *Constellations* on the contrabass.

—Anatoly, I'm worried sick about Monique. Arris would think nothing of having her disappear forever. Isabella already threatened me with having Monique whacked in Buenos Aires. Somehow she escaped only to go missing when she arrived at Nice airport, less than twenty miles from here.

—Yes, but we have a strong position. We still have the original Gorky and the Gringovitch paintings which Girolamo Dente made, said Gringovitch. They are in a vault in your bank. If they want them, they will have to play ball with us. You, I, and Monique are safe as long as we hold the real goods, all of which, I might remind you, are *mine*.

—Sounds pretty iffy to me, said Ben.

—Hey, it's a chess game. They are in this for the money. We have nothing to lose but a forged painting. They have everything to lose. We sacrifice a copy, they squabble among themselves, and we offer to solve the problem in exchange for your friend Monique's safe return. It works because they need the paintings more than they need Monique. They both are clever at machinations, but they also don't trust each other.

—No honor among thieves, said Ben. But I'm still skeptical of our chances. We will need Lady Luck on our side.

—Luck is when preparation meets opportunity. We have both preparation and opportunity. *They* are the ones operating partially blind. Remember, they may have our Queen, but *we* control the board

—Places everyone, said the stage manager clapping his hands. Five minutes, places please!

—I hope to hell you are right, Anatoly, said Ben taking his contrabass and ripping up and down a four-octave scale at astonishing speed.

—We're still on for dinner, Ben. See you at my hotel at six tonight.

Ben felt better, but he was still worried about Monique. Where was she? Was she hurt? Was she bound and gagged in some dark basement?

* * *

Monique was indeed blindfolded, bound and gagged, not in a basement, but a closet in the apartment at 17, rue de Paris. The space was small and smelled of cleaning supplies. Her legs were

pulled up even with her face with her ankles duct taped together. Her eyes and mouth were bound in duct tape. Her arms were pulled behind and cable tied together. She was naked and felt unclean and completely violated. She could hear faint voices. One of the voices sounded like Isabella Sanitizzare. Monique passed into a semi-conscious fog from the drugs injected into her.

* * *

Not twenty feet away in the living room of the apartment were Isabella Sanitizzare, Dan Arris, Arno Aghajanian and Zoë Bontemps. Zoë and Isabella were dressed in expensive business suits, while Arno and Arris were dressed in blazers and slacks. Arno sported outsized suspenders decorated with rampant lions. They all were looking at Gorky's painting *The Unfaithful Wife*, which rested on an easel. Photographers' lights on tripods brightly illuminated the painting.

—Well Aghajanian, do we have a deal? said Dan Arris proffering his hand.

—Not quite yet, Arris. I still would like to have an expert verify this painting.

—Did you have someone in mind?

—Girolamo Dent. He is one of the principals at Découvrir Art in Marseille. He's a world expert on art copying and forgery.

— Ah, Girolamo, said Arris. Yes, I used him myself to authenticate this very painting. In fact it was in his shop just a few days ago

—So. Is it okay if I have Girolamo examine this painting?

—Not a problem. However, Girolamo represents a conflict of interest, said Arris. May I recommend Lena Koshka, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art at Villa Arson? She came to Nice from the Louvre where she was curator of contemporary painting and director of contemporary painting acquisitions. She has the highest credentials you will find in Europe.

—How do I contact Madame Koshka? said Aghajanian.

—Isabella, do you have any contact information for Lena Koshka?
asked Arris.

—I believe in my purse, which is in the den. If I have her office number, I will telephone her from the den. I'll be right back.

—Zoë, would you like to try that Beckstein piano? said Aghajanian. You have been eyeing it since we arrived here.

—Is it okay if I play the piano, Mr. Arris?

—Help yourself. We are waiting for Isabella

Zoë begins playing Mozart's *Piano Sonata in C, K545*

—Zoë is not only an accomplished actress, but as you can hear, Arris, a gifted pianist.

—A lot of talent in one beautiful package.

—We're in luck, said Isabella walking into the room. Lena is just now leaving her office and will be here in ten minutes.

—Excellent, said Aghajanian.

Zoë stopped playing.

—I'm so sorry to interrupt, said Isabella. Zoë, you play the piano so well. Who did you study with?

—I'm self-taught. I was raised to believe that all girls who want to get ahead in polite society should play the piano. Unfortunately, my parents were dirt poor, so I taught myself on an old upright piano the super of our apartment building had in the basement.

—You were a great teacher, said Arris.

—Well, said Zoë, some of Ben's musician friends would give me tips and pointers, but never formal lessons.

—Zoë, said Arris, tell me, how is it to suddenly find yourself a television star?

—Nothing is sudden, Mr. Arris. I've worked hard all my life to be an actress. And I am grateful to Ben for supporting me, but it was all *my* hard work.

—Let me tell you Arris, said Aghajanian, Clarone was a major league bastard while Zoë struggled to become an actress. A big chunk of the money for this painting will eventually come from Zoë's divorce settlement, by that I mean Clarone's wallet. I intend to crucify and bankrupt the bastard in court.

—That would make me very happy, said Arris. He made a cuckold of me with my wife. You can have the son of a bitch drawn and quartered as far as I'm concerned. Clarone's a real conceited peacock of a man. A user, a real user, especially of women.

—Very interesting, may I have you deposed?

—I don't think so, Arno. As the French say, *la vengeance est mieux servi froid*.

—Yes, revenge is best served cold and it's usually we lawyers who are hired to get it served.

—Touché.

The doorbell rang. Isabella walked to the front door and buzzed in Lena Koshka. When all six feet plus of Lena Koshka strutted through the door dressed in a stunning silk sheath dress, with a mink coat folded over her arm, the men immediately stood up. Lena could wear her height and gait as sexual weapons.

She was the sum of female beauty and power.

—This coat was just too warm to wear climbing all the stairs, Lena said, throwing her coat and handbag on one of the side chairs. Hello, I'm Lena Koshka.

—Lena, said Isabella, this is Dan Arris, the dealer for the Gorky painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*, and this is Arno Aghajanian, the prospective buyer.

Lena shook hands all around. The force of her handshake startled both men.

—Ah, this must be the elusive Gorky painting, said Lena, her authority giving her the power position in the room. You know I acquired two Gorky paintings for the Louvre?

—No, I didn't know that, but you come highly recommended, said Aghajanian. I would like to engage you to authenticate this painting.

—We can discuss fees and expenses later, said Lena. First I would like to examine the painting. It certainly matches Gorky's late style. Interesting that Mogooch, Gorky's wife, is not pictured.

— The wife, said Arris, is represented by all the symbols of his former life in Turkish Armenia: his mother, his sisters and brothers, the mountains, the barren and burnt earth, the Armenian Genocide...Gorky's wife, who he called Mogooch, was an mainline American WASP whose maiden name was Agnes Magruder. She never understood this straight-laced patrician Armenian who held his mother in his arms as she starved to death. Bill de Kooning's wife, Elaine, introduced them. One can hardly imagine a bigger mismatch. It was a no-brainer when the dashing romantic Chilean painter, Roberto Matta, came on the scene. Agnes Magruder succumbed to Matta's advances. At the time, Gorky was suffering from colon cancer and the after effects of a serious automobile accident, which left his painting arm damaged. To top it off, he lost half of his works in a studio fire. This painting, and his suicide a week or so after finishing it are the culmination of a lifetime of suffering. Matta stole the painting from Gorky's home the day of his suicide, probably while Gorky's body still warm hung in the shed. It is not part of Gorky's *catalogue raisonné*. The theft of his artistic property was the final tragedy of his life.

Lena walked over to her handbag and retrieved a magnifying glass.

—Aha! A regular Sherlock Holmes, said Aghajanian, amused.

—Yes, the 20-power glass is more than adequate for a first examination, said Lena. I must correct you, Arris. The revised *catalogue raisonné* mentions this very painting and quotes from a letter by a neighbor describing this painting and Gorky's agony and heartbreak. I dare say few people outside of Matta's circle have ever seen this painting. It is a treat to stand before the illusive object.

—How much time, said Arris, will you need to verify this painting?

—I can't begin working on it until Monday. I will need some time to do forensic analysis, which might include chemical analysis of the paint, canvas, stretcher bars, and as much of the recent provenance as possible. There are also the stylistic features to consider. If there are serious questions, I could have the conservation laboratory at the Louvre run some tests. Worst-case scenario, it will probably take

a month to six weeks. If I feel confident about the authenticity of the painting, I would say a week to ten days.

—How does that fit in with your plans, Arno? asked Arris.

—I don't think very well. Zoë, when do you have to be back in L.A.?

—I begin shooting on Thursday, so I must leave France no later than Tuesday. We're booked our flights for Tuesday afternoon.

There was a silence in the room as they all looked at each other.

—May I suggest this, said Isabella. Arno, you make a fifty per cent deposit which my bank will hold in escrow. When Lena is finished with her appraisal and examination, you will authorize the transfer of the complete price to Arris's Swiss bank.

—What is the price of the painting? asked Lena.

—1.25M U.S. dollars, said Isabella.

—I should think 350 thousand would be more than enough, said Lena.

—I can live with that, said Aghajanian. I'm a little disappointed that I won't be flying home with the painting. It was to be the highlight of the trip.

—Of course, said Arris, you could take it to Girolamo Dente, though he has already thoroughly examined this painting.

—Signor Dente is highly competent, said Lena. Without actually taking chips and samples, I doubt I could be more thorough than Dente. But sometimes, it pays to have another pair of eyes look at a picture.

—Let's do this, said Arris. We'll take the painting to Lena on Monday. If she doesn't have any serious questions, we will complete the transaction on Tuesday morning. Then you, Zoë and the Gorky can fly back to Los Angeles. Does that work for everyone? In the meantime Arno, you make a 350 thousand dollar escrow payment.

—That works. I'll give you my check, and Monday we will take the painting to Lena's office.

Arno and Arris shook hands. Isabella produced a bottle of champagne. Toasts were offered and acknowledged.

—I really must be going, said Lena. I'll see you Monday morning at nine in my office.

—A pleasure meeting you Lena, said Arno.

—Yes, Lena, you've been a lifesaver, said Isabella.

I thank you for coming on such short notice and agreeing to examine the painting. Here's to Monday, Arno said raising his glass.

To be continued.

