Five Million Yen: Chapter 59

by Daniel Harris

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Girolamo Dente was nodding off in his studio at Découvrir Art when he heard the alarm. He ignored it. In this part of Marseille alarms were sounding all the time. Almost all the tenants in the building set off their burglar alarms opening their offices, which rang until they could get inside to disable them.

It was the heat that woke him a second time. He looked up and saw the outer office and gallery full of flames. He reached for the telephone to call the fire department just as firemen broke open the hallway door to the outer office. He ran to the door separating the two rooms.

—Close that door and get on the floor! Shouted one of the firemen.

—Wait! Wait! The paintings. Save the paintings!

—Close that door!

There was a cloud of steam as one of the firemen emptied a fire extinguisher on the flames. Dente ran into the steam and snatched a Rothko and a Watteau that were nearest to the studio. He took them in his studio and ran back into the front room slamming the door behind him. Before he could grab any paintings a burly fireman grabbed him and carried him back into his studio.

—I must save the paintings. They are priceless treasures.

—You are going nowhere, old man. The fire will be out in a few minutes. Is there anyone else in this office?

—No one, we must save the paintings. Some are from major museums.

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Dente could hear the firemen breaking windows. The burglar alarm sounded.

The old man sat stooped, dejected, with head in hands. On the street, Ivan Gorelka walked past the fire trucks and ambulances. Looking up he saw flames lighting up the offices of Découvrir Art. He removed the surgical gloves on his hands and dropped them into the great Marseille sewer system. Using the same Bic lighter he used to start the fire, he lit a Gitane Brunes.

—Flic my Bic, he said aloud. He had heard the expression visiting Dan Arris in Brooklyn a month before. Now he was headed to strong drink and a woman. It was time he tried a black woman. A professional clean job deserved those rewards.

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—Well, Arris, we have sold the Gorky, said Isabella Sanitizzare.

—Not the *correct* Gorky, my beautiful thief, said Arris.

—Whatever are you talking about? This is the painting Gringovitch *gave* me

Your men were with me the whole time.

—This painting is a copy. What did you do with the original?

—Dan, I really don't know what you're talking about. How do you know it's a copy?

—I know because *I made it*.

—Nonsense! You're lying. It's the real Gorky.

—A real Gorky *copy*. So what game are you playing this time? Did you get this copy from Gringovitch or that bastard Clarone?

—What game are *you* playing Dan?

—I don't play games. Clarone brought two copies of the Gorky to Nice from New York. Gringovitch took the original with him to Rome. Somehow you've managed to swap the original for a copy. What's with you bitches? First Claudia tried to use her charms to get the painting from Clarone, and now you.

—Dan, I've never touched Clarone. I drove him and his friend from the airport and I know he had two paintings with him. He had one painting when I drove him to Découvrir Art in Marseille. I saw two Gringovitch paintings at his bank yesterday with Lena.

—Did Clarone *say* he had a Gorky painting in his bank?

—No. He said he only had the two Gringovitch paintings.

Arris walked over to the piano and looked out the window. Victor Taxi and Serge, his Russian muscle man, were leaning against Victor's car smoking.

—I'm going to take the lights down to the car. You pack up the painting. I'll be back to get it and don't try any funny business. Now that you know this painting is worthless, I guess I can trust you. Lena will know immediately that this is not a real Gorky. She's too good.

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Lena Koshka opened her office and looked at her watch: 7:30. It would be 1:30pm in New York. She dialed the number she had for Lt. Harold Smith, NYPD.

—New York Police Department, Art Fraud Division. How may I direct your call?

—This is Lena Koshka in Nice, France. I'm the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. I need to speak with Lieutenant Harold Smith.

—Lieutenant Smith is not at this number. I will need to locate him. Is this urgent?

—Yes, I have discovered something that may be of interest to him.

—Give me a number where he can reach you. I will request he call you ASAP.

Lena gave the operator her number and hung up. She wondered if her husband, the orchestra conductor Marcello Metronomini, was sleeping with that Prima Donna, Belle Steinmetz. He was always conducting her performances. He was in Boston, conducting her as Anne Trulove in Stavinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. She was ready to divorce her lothario husband. She wished she would meet an interesting man to take as a lover in Nice. The phone rang.

—Allo?

—May I speak to Lena Koshka? This is Lieutenant Harold Smith, New York City Police Department, returning her call.

—Hello, Lieutenant, this in Lena. You may remember me from the Louvre and the suspicious Jackson Pollack.

—I could hardly forget you, Mme. Koshka. Your eye and expertise were critical to cracking that case.

—Thank you, Lieutenant. This time it is a Gorky painting. Earlier this evening, I was called to authenticate Gorky's *The Unfaithful Wife*. As you may or may not know, Roberto Matta stole it from Gorky's home the day Gorky committed suicide. It was an unknown Gorky until a letter was found describing it a few years ago. Agnes Magruder, Gorky's wife, told Joseph Campbell that she saw it in Matta's New York studio before Gorky's funeral. The art dealers, Dan Arris and Isabella Sanitizzare were trying to sell it to a Los Angeles divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian, for 1.25 million dollars. What caught my eye was that the paint was not thick enough to be a typical Gorky. He painted over canvases many times as he worked out his themes. There can typically be twenty or more layers of paint. This looked like perhaps two or three layers.

—You know of course, Lena that Gorky was a very ill man who was partially incapacitated. He might not have had the strength to put that much effort into the painting.

—Yes, that's true, but there was something about this. If it is a copy, it was obviously made from the original. The brush strokes are not inspired like original brushwork. They are too sure as one finds in copies.

—Lena, we have a big file on Dan Arris. He served time in federal prison for counterfeiting. But he is well connected in Washington and Moscow, so he was released early. Rumor has it that he murdered, or at least fingered, a Soviet double agent. He was released with no parole after serving less than a year. What you are describing is something that fits Arris's *modus operandi*…duplicates, forgeries, copies and originals all mixed together, a regular three-card monte game with paintings. I am willing to bet there is another copy and Arris also has the original hidden somewhere. He likes to work in threes.

—What should I do?

—Play along, but declare the painting you see a copy, albeit a good one. Knowing Arris, he will find another buyer. I also bet he or one of his associates has the original. We know a certain Celine Crisse who tried to fence a *Guarneri de Gesu* violin, confessed to renting an apartment from Anatoly Gringovitch in Paris which she paid for with a painting she took as palimony from Roberto Matta's Rome atelier. She didn't know who the artist was, but her description matches the one in the revised Gorky *catalogue raisonné*.

—This is all very interesting.

—It gets better. Gringovitch's friend Ben Clarone, currently a soloist with the Monte Carlo Orchestra, took two paintings to Nice on his way to the gig. We also know that he took one of the paintings to Découvrir Art in Marseille. The manifests said they were Gringovitch paintings, but customs in Nice did not verify that. In the meantime, one of INTERPOL's double agents stole the paintings from the hotel room in Nice of Clarone's friend Gabe Benjamin. They were cheap prop paintings from the opera given to them by Pascal LeRoi, a set designer at the Opera de Nice.

—That sounds like everyone was covering their backside in different ways.

—Exactly. Here's what I want you to do. Contact Inspector Lilly Rose at *Police judiciaire*. Tell her what you told me. They will supply protection for you and instruct you on how to proceed. When are you doing the evaluation?

—Monday morning at nine.

—Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill will be in Nice on Sunday. He will contact you, so give me your home and work telephone numbers. He has worked with Inspector Rose in New York. He is intimidating, but he is an outstanding detective, and he speaks perfect Canadian French. Unfortunately, I have a surgery on Monday and can't make the trip myself.

—I hope it's not serious.

—Melanoma, brought on by tests done on sailors during World War II. I'm okay, but I have to have this operation done. I will be in contact with Mulvihill hourly if necessary.

—Is this Arris dangerous? Am I in danger?

—The short answer: it depends.

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Serge, Arris's muscle man, took the key from Arris, and climbed the steps to the apartment at 17, rue de Paris. Dispense with two women and return with the Gorky painting. He had done six lines of coke and was ready to have his way with two women. When he entered the apartment he could hear a woman using the toilet in one of the bathrooms. His blood was up. After being sexually assaulted Isabella died like Claudia, by being pulled backward and hitting her head on a shower faucet. The shower washed away her blood. Her dress hung on a hook on the bathroom door; her stockings and underwear were carefully arranged on the vanity.

Serge then released Monique from her bindings. She could barely stand and was dopey. Serge carried her to another bathroom in the apartment.

—Who are you? What are you doing to me? said Monique.

—Clean yourself. You are filthy. I will get your clothes.

Monique knew this man was trouble. She vaguely remembered him and his cigarette breath on her face as he trussed her up in the closet. She had to escape. Her fear pumped adrenaline into her system. There was a bathrobe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. She put it on and slipped out of the bathroom leaving the water running. She could hear him in one of the bedrooms. She hoped there was an exit door in the kitchen. There was and the key was in the lock. She slipped out of the door and locked it behind her. The stairs led down to the back courtyard. There was only one way out of the courtyard and that was through the building, but that door had locked behind her.

Serge stripped and walked back to the bathroom with his pistol. That little Dutch cutie was going to feel the full might of this Cossack's lust. Arris had prevented him from having his way with

her last night, but now she was all his. He was in a full coke-fueled rut when he entered the bathroom.

—Where is that bitch?

He started to search the rooms and closets. In the hallway outside the kitchen he saw a wet footprint.

—Don't play coy with me Dutchie. This Russian wolf is going to rip you apart.

He tried the back door. Locked. There were keys hanging on a pegboard in the kitchen. None of them fit the back door. His frustration mounted. He walked back to the bathroom where Isabella lay. He mounted her twice, showered, dressed, took the painting off the easel, locked the front door and headed down to the street.

—It's finished, he told Arris.

—Here's you money. Now go home to Mother Russia, you crazy pervert.

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Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill, dressed in a cheap polyester suit, was standing in front of Lieutenant Harold Smith's desk. He was accustomed to his tightly tailored uniform. This suit was like a bag. He tried on a smaller size but had pulled out the sleeve trying it on.

—Jesus, Mulvihill, said Smith, don't you know how to dress like a civilized man? I'm sending you off to work with some of the top art detectives in the world and you look like the KGB wardrobe office gave you that suit.

—Lieutenant, give me a break. The only formal things I attend are cop funerals and I have to wear my police dress uniform. I got this suit at Dennison's Men's Clothier in Union, New Jersey for $79.

—Didn't you have a suit when you got married?

—Yeah, but that was about three sizes ago.

—Donuts. They'll do it every time. I keep telling you, nix the donuts.

—Easy, Lieutenant. You know the crazy hours I work. Tell me what I need to know.

Lieutenant Smith outlined the case and explained the contacts he would work alongside in France.

—Now remember, Mulvihill, it is not our jurisdiction. As far as I'm concerned you are there to get information. Eyes and ears open, mouth shut. And, please, no confrontations with Inspector Lilly Rose. You could learn a lot from her. Call me anytime things change. I don't care *what* the hour is.

—I'll be on my best professional behavior, Lieutenant.

—One last thing. Remember Dan Arris and his associates probably will be armed. Watch yourself. Consider Arris dangerous. Let the frogs take the hits.

You've got money and an American Express card from upstairs, right?

—Yes, sir.

—Okay, no go down to Barney's on 17th street Mulvihill and get a decent suit that fits.

—Are you sure that's all right with the accountants?

—Absolutely. And one more thing, don't get your arms tired flying to Nice.

—Lieutenant, spare me.

To be continued.