

Five Million Yen: Chapter 60

by Daniel Harris

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Thérèse Defarge felt the first drop around ten. She had just fallen asleep so ignored it. When the second and third drops hit her head, she moved over in her bed. It dawned on her that maybe there was trouble, but she had drunk almost a bottle of wine with her lonely dinner. She finished the bottle knitting a sweater for her grandson in Paris while watching a mystery film on television. The film, *Le boucher*, was giving her nightmares with its Jack the Ripper-style murders

She became fully awake when she moved onto the growing wet spot on her bed.

—*Mon dieu!* What is this? A flood.

She pulled on her housecoat and slippers took her keys and hurried downstairs to see Sabine, the concierge. Sabine's cat, Zoot, sat patiently waiting outside the rear courtyard door. Thérèse ignored the cat and knocked on Sabine's door.

—Sabine, this is Thérèse. Quick, there is a leak!

—One moment, please.

Thérèse could hear the television in the concierge's apartment. She recognized the screeching strings from the famous shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the film that followed *Le Boucher* on this Friday night's mystery movies.

—Sabine, hurry there is a water leak.

—Oui? said Sabine opening her door.

—There is a leak into my apartment from above.

—A leak?

—Yes, a leak of water into my bedroom. My bed is flooded.

—Let me get my keys. Thérèse, do me a favor, let Zoot in and make sure he comes into my apartment and doesn't run upstairs. He has a girlfriend on the third floor.

Thérèse didn't like cats. Zoot was a big fluffy friendly fellow, but even so, she had no intention of grabbing him if he tried to run upstairs. She opened the courtyard door. Zoot scooted away.

—*Ici* Zoot. Come kitty. Come, come.

Zoot walked slowly toward Thérèse.

—Stop teasing me Zoot. Come inside.

—Thérèse, what's the problem? Won't he come in? Zoot! said Sabine turning on the courtyard light and entering the courtyard.

Sabine lunged for the elusive Zoot.

—Do you hear that? said Sabine.

—What?

—Listen?

—Yes, it is the sound of a woman crying.

Both women followed Zoot. There huddled against the building, shivering in a bathrobe, was a strange woman. Zoot was rubbing up against her leg.

—*Mon Dieu*, said the women together.

—Who are you? asked Sabine. Why are you here?

* * *

Ben and Gringovitch were finishing their dinner in a small restaurant near Gringovitch's hotel in Monte Carlo.

—Well, Ben, if you are so concerned that something bad has happened to Monique, you should call the police. Of course that could be fraught with some danger since you've not legally entered the country as Ben Clarone.

—Well, I do have two police contacts: Inspector Paumé at INTERPOL, and Inspector Lilly Rose with police judiciaire. She questioned me two weeks ago when I was living at 17, rue de Paris, about the two paintings I brought from New York. Your buddy, Dan

Arris, filed a complaint that I had stolen them. I showed Inspector Rose the one I had, which was one of Dente's copies of the over-painting. The other was at Découvrir Art, Dente was copying the gouache over painting in oils.

—Were they impressed?

—I screwed up, Anatoly. I told Inspector Rose that it was an acrylic painting, when in fact it is oil. Arris had, of course, told her it was gouache. I think Rose caught that slip. She's as ugly as a toad, but very sharp.

—Rose sounds too close to the Gorky for my comfort. Remember, Arris showed it to a prospective buyer earlier tonight. I wonder how our gambit worked? Hopefully Arris didn't realize that it was one of his copies of the real Gorky.

—Wait. I might have the number of Lieutenant Giles LaPonti. He drove me to the bank when I deposited the copy of *Abstract with Yellow*, said Ben looking through the notebook that served as his agenda and address book.

—How much does he know about the case?

—I don't know, he's a regular guy and helped me when that wacko Antonini Cattivino threw my contrabass clarinet out the window. I'm going to call him.

* * *

Lieutenant Giles LaPonti had just come on duty when he received the radio call about a dead woman at 17, rue de Paris. When he arrived at the address, the local police, the fire department, *and* Sabine were engaged in a shouting match. Sabine wanted the water cleaned up at once. The police didn't want a crime scene disturbed. The fire department wanted to leave if they couldn't pump out the flood. Monique lay in an ambulance, happy to be warm, attended by a female medic.

—Lieutenant, you might want some boots. The water is ankle deep in the bathroom, said a fireman.

LaPonti took some boots and a pair of surgeon's gloves from his car, donned them, and climbed to the top-floor apartment. The first thing he noticed was that there were too many people gaping at the

nude corpse of a young woman in the bathroom. He ordered everyone but police personnel to leave.

—Is there a police photographer at this crime scene? asked LaPonti of a young gendarme.

—Yes, the photographer finished in here and is now in the other bathroom.

—Bring him here, I wish to confirm that he has photographed important evidence.

The corpse was on her knees, face down, her body submerged underwater in the overflowing tub of water. There was a large contusion on the back of her head with bone fragments. *Rigor mortis* had set in, her knees were splayed and it appeared that she had been sexually abused both vaginally and anally. A *préservatif* protruded from her dilated anus. Was there a killer-rapist who left that clue at the crime scene? He mentally went through open serial killer files. It seemed familiar. He would need to check when he returned to his office.

—Lieutenant, you called for me?

—Have you fully photographed the corpse?

—Yes, sir. She is a beautiful woman.

—Don't get smart with me. Did you take close-ups of the head wound, especially the bone fragments? Also close-ups of the bent faucet handle. Do not touch anything. When you are done with that, close-ups of her genitals and anal area.

—I have plenty of pictures of those parts, he said grinning.

—I'm sure. Are you a suspect, you nascent pervert? Make sure you have close-ups of the head wound. I hope you did not touch the corpse.

—No, sir. I was very careful. I am not a pervert.

—Prove it, or I'll take you in as a suspect.

If this was a little shower sex gone wrong, it was one of the stranger cases LaPonti had seen. Who did this? A lover? A friend who tried to get romantic and it didn't work out, an opportunistic intruder or a serial killer-rapist? The attitude of her body didn't indicate that she drowned, but rather died from the blow to her

head. The water had washed away any blood, fingerprints, semen, and other evidence. He saw there was only one woman's high-heeled shoe in the bathroom. He noticed clumps of what looked like the woman's hair entwined in the handles of the vanity faucets.

—The coroner is here, Lieutenant, said a young gendarme. Also, an Inspector Lilly Rose, police judiciaire is on the telephone for you in the kitchen.

The coroner and two paramedics arrived at the bathroom door.

—LaPonti, what do you have for me tonight? Ah, a beautiful young woman I see.

—Well, a quite *dead* beautiful woman. She may have been engaged in consensual intercourse in the tub when she and her partner slipped and fell, fatally hitting her head. That's for you to discover. The nicely folded underwear on the vanity might indicate that her assailant arranged her underwear after the fact. It appears she may have been sexually assaulted post-mortem. Look at the sink. There are, what looks like, her hair and someone's blood on the faucet spout and handles. Inspect that thoroughly and save all the hair. Take samples of the blood for the lab

LaPonti sloshed through water to the kitchen. He was surprised more water hadn't leaked to the lower floors and stairwells. He noticed the errant high-heeled shoe in the hallway. He told the gendarme in the hallway to note the position of the shoe and have photographs made.

—Yes, Inspector Rose, this is Lieutenant LaPonti, he said, hopping up to sit on the kitchen counter to lift his feet from the water.

—I hear there has been a murder, said Lilly Rose. Do you know the victim's name?

—No, but there has been some strange events here tonight with too many people muddying up the crime scene ogling a beautiful woman's badly abused dead body.

—Our good friend Ben Clarone telephoned me after he talked to you, said Rose. He is worried about his girlfriend, Monique Swann, a Dutch national and Pan Am stewardess. She never appeared at his hotel last night.

—Yes, he told me. This corpse appears to be an American, but that is purely a quick deduction from the labels on her clothing. Her purse is in the living room. I have yet to examined it. There is a young woman who the concierge and a resident found huddled in the courtyard in a bathrobe. Maybe *she's* Ben's missing girlfriend.

—Ben's girl is Monique Zwaan. If it is Monique Zwaan and she is in hospital or can be released, call Ben at Hôtel Select in Beaulieu-sur-Mer.

—Will do. But you understand that my focus is on investigating the crime scene. I need to discover the victim's name and any clues to a motive.

—I think you will discover that the victim is Isabella Sanitizzare, the American art dealer who lives most of the year in Nice. I received a telephone call from Lena Koshka, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. She was at that address earlier this evening evaluating a painting for Isabella Sanitizzare and Dan Arris, who you may remember had lodged a complaint of art theft against Ben Clarone.

—I never met Arris, but I remember Clarone. I took him to the bank to put a painting in a bank vault.

—Yes, and you screwed up. You let Clarone put it in *his* bank vault, not *our* bank vault.

—Ahh...I don't think so, but continue.

—The painting Sanitizzare and Arris were selling turns out to be a copy of a rare late painting by Arshile Gorky The prospective buyer, Arno Aghajanian accompanied by Zoë Bontemps were making a pre-sale inspection. Lena Koshka suspects the painting is a copy.

—Wait a minute. Isn't Zoë Bontemps Ben Clarone's wife?

—They are separated.

—I see, famous people and their martial problems.

—Lieutenant LaPonti, said Rose, call me in Paris as soon as you know the identity of the corpse or the girl discovered in the courtyard. That girl may have some valuable information.

—She is being cared for by medical personal. It is not clear if she has been sexually assaulted. Apparently she was trussed up pretty tightly in a broom closet here in the kitchen.

—Lieutenant, said an older gendarme, look what I found in the trash under the kitchen sink, pointing to a Pam Am stewardess's uniform.

—*Volia*, Inspector Rose, said LaPonti into the phone, one of my men just found a Pam Am stewardess's uniform in the trash under the kitchen sink. One of these women might be the missing Monique.

—Good work. Now put the pieces together.

—That's what I do Inspector Rose, said LaPonti annoyed.

—I'm getting a better idea of motive and victims, said Rose. Keep me informed. Call Clarone only if you have good news. I have another call waiting. Remember, I'm in Paris.

—Yes, Inspector Rose. I have your numbers.

* * *

Inspector Paumé, INTERPOL, was on hold waiting to speak with Inspector Lilly Rose.

—Ah, Paumé. Sorry, but I had an important call from a crime scene.

—I, too, have been busy. There was a fire at Découvrir Art in Marseille.

—Isn't that Yousef Al Sidran's gallery?

—The same. But Al Sidran was not there, we know he is in China. Only the old man Giralomo Dente was working in the studio.

—What was the extent of the damage?

—I have not been at the scene. The fire battalion chief told me about a dozen paintings were severely damaged. Découvrir Art has a direct alarm to the fire station two blocks away. So they were there quickly.

—Do they know the cause?

—Strangely, the fire was not in the studio where all the solvents are kept, but in the gallery. No residues or traces of solvents have

been found in the gallery. The fire appears to have started near a painting, which was leaning up against a desk.

—Very interesting, said Rose.

—The chief said that it was most likely arson and whoever did it was a professional, as in CIA, MI6 or KGB. There were no obvious traces of a starter, and no reason for a fire.

—Why would someone with that training be starting a fire in an art gallery?

—Stranger things have happened. The most damaged painting appears to have been a Gorky, only a corner of which survived.

— Paumé, get me that corner. And get it to my office in Paris by tomorrow.

—I'll do what I can, Inspector, but you know Marseille is a city that marches to its own drum. Sending crime evidence to Paris is not high on their list of acceptable behavior. There might have to be some *quid pro quo*.

—I have plenty of *quid* for their *quo*, snapped Rose. I must have all the remains of that painting, Paumé. Don't fail me now, and don't break any laws.

* * *

Michel, the owner of Hôtel Select in Beaulieu-sur-Mer, and Ben Clarone were playing chess in the bar of the hotel. Ben's friend Gabe Benjamin sat watching the game, getting soused on single malt Scotch and kibitzing about the game with the two players.

—Ben, I think Michel has your bishop and if you let him take it, it's over.

—Gabe, let me fail on my own terms. I've got enough on my mind. I thought by now there would be some word about Monique.

—Ben, get hip, missing people are called missing because you can't find them.

—You two talk funny American English, said Michel, taking Ben's bishop. Gabe, how are you getting back to your hotel?

—Taxi. It is how I came. Ben asked if I would help him hold the vigil.

—Ben must rest, said Michel. He has a big concert tomorrow. It is midnight and I have to go to bed. Ben should also.

A sleepy young man entered the bar. He was the night desk clerk.

—Monsieur Clarone, he said approaching the three men. There is a Lieutenant La Ponti on the telephone for you.

—Pray for good news, said Ben, practically running into the lobby to take the call.

—I will put the call into the first cabine, said the desk clerk, chasing Ben.

Ben hesitated before picking up the telephone. What if it was bad news?

—This is Ben Clarone, Lieutenant LaPonti.

—This is Monique, Ben. Yes, it's me. Talk to me. I have to hear your voice.

—Monique, you're safe? I can't believe it's you. Are you okay? Are you hurt?

—Now I am safe, but it has been a terrible twenty-four hours. I am a little beat up, the medics want me to go to the hospital for the night, but I am coming to your hotel. I am so happy. Lieutenant LaPonti wants to speak to you.

Ben could hear Monique hysterical in the background as she handed the phone to LaPonti.

—Monsieur Clarone, we have your friend, Monique. We need to ask her some questions and then I will drive her to your hotel. I promise you, she will be in your arms before two this morning. But I warn you; she has been badly beaten both mentally and physically, so be gentle with her, make no demands. Promise me this, Clarone, or I'll have her taken to the hospital. It might be best if she has a room by herself.

—How can I thank you, Lieutenant?

—I'll find a way. By the way, as an American jazz musician you will enjoy this. A cat named Zoot found Monique.

—You mean Zoot Sims, the jazz musician?

—No, a very smart fluffy gray cat named Zoot, said LaPonti laughing.

To be continued.

