

Five Million Yen: Chapter 64

by Daniel Harris

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Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill sat at the desk in his hotel room wrapped in a towel. His stomach growled. Those tiny French portions did nothing to assuage his hunger. He could have used a big steak and a baked potato, not some frou-frou fish entree.

Mulvihill had arranged the files he'd brought from New York on the bed. On a yellow legal pad, he made a concordance of three men: Dan Arris, Anatoly Gringovitch and Ben Clarone, three paintings: the Gorky and two (?) copies, and three dead people. He knew that three people had died from suspicious circumstances: (1) Claudia Monschaud, Arris estranged wife and perhaps Ben Clarone's paramour; (2) Isabella Sanitizzare, an American art dealer living in Nice, associate of Arris and wannabe art dealer for Gringovitch, probably a Clarone paramour; and (3) an unidentified Russian male, who may have been a KGB associate of Arris's, perhaps used by Clarone.

Mulvihill suspected, but could not prove, that the connection to all three murders and the three men was a painting by Arshile Gorky, *The Unfaithful Wife*, which the Chilean painter Roberto Matta, who was Gorky's wife's lover, had stolen from Gorky's home the day of Gorky's suicide in 1948. Celine Crisse had used the painting as payment for five years rent for Gringovitch's Paris apartment. Crisse most likely had stolen the painting from Matta as revenge for Matta's infamous philandering.

Where was the Gorky painting now? Gringovitch had it for sale; he had been in Lieutenant Smith's office when Lena Koshka had

telephoned. The sale would explain Arris's and Sanitizzare's involvement, but what was Ben Clarone's role in all this? What were the two paintings Clarone had brought to Nice from New York? Where were they? What was the relationship between those paintings, Clarone, Arris, Gringovitch and the Gorky painting? Why did the two women die in showers? Was a serial murderer on the loose? Arris, a convicted money forger and sometime art dealer, had some role in all this, most likely as Gringovitch's dealer for the Gorky sale; but perhaps as an art forger. Forgery was Arris's *métier*. Did he make copies of the Gorky? Then there was Clarone. Was he just an *ingénue* working for the other two as a courier? Or was he the main player. Lieutenant Smith in New York, thought Clarone was an innocent. Mulvihill was not sure. And why was Zoë Bontemps, Clarone's estranged wife, here in Nice? If one could believe the tabloids, certainly not to see Clarone, they weren't speaking. Besides she was here with her divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian. Was Zoë a shill for Clarone in this art caper? Zoë could easily use her charms to convince Aghajanian to buy the Gorky? Apparently, the Gorky deal was on hold until Lena Koshka could authenticate the painting Arris and Sanitizzare were offering for sale. Koshka had cautioned Aghajanian that it might be a copy. Mulvihill's yellow pad was a mishmash of crossing lines.

Now he had to shift gears and attend Clarone's concert in Monte Carlo tonight. Not his cup of tea. Some Irish fiddle music, a few pints of Guinness and bed were what he wanted. A man his size did not sleep in airline economy seats. It was Saturday night in Nice, almost forty-eight hours since last he slept in his bed next to his understanding policeman's wife.

The phone rang.

—Oui?

—An Inspector Lilly Rose on the line for you, Monsieur Mulvihill.

—Merci. Connect us, please.

—Mulvihill? This is Inspector Lilly Rose, she said in French-accented English.

—Good evening, Inspector.

—We will be outside your hotel in fifteen minutes to take you to the concert in Monte Carlo.

—You have my ticket?

—I have arranged for you to sit next to Ben Clarone's girlfriend, Monique Zwaan. We are fearful that someone might want to harm her.

—My turf is New York City. Manhattan specifically.

—You are my guest. I would expect your cooperation. I would do no less for you.

—Of course I will cooperate with you, but remember, this is not my jurisdiction.

—Fifteen minutes. No uniform. A suit and tie or formal wear.

—I'll be ready.

—I have new developments to share with you.

Mulvihill was tying his tie in front of the mirror. On the vanity was the yellow pad. Mulvihill finished with his tie and looked at the pad. All the arrows from paintings and people, dead or alive, led to Ben Clarone.

—That sneaky bastid has fooled us all, said Mulvihill in full Bronx Irish to his image in the mirror.

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Ben was visibly agitated. He had to be at the concert hall to prepare for the orchestra concert. He telephoned Gabe Benjamin, Gringovitch's Brooklyn neighbor, and asked him to take Monique to the concert. Gabe reminded Ben that his dates for the evening were Ida Oates and Isabella Sanitizzare.

—There's only one problem, Ben. I haven't been able to reach them. No one is answering the telephone at Isabella's apartment.

—Well, Isabella's Mercedes is plenty big enough for the four of you. Can't you stop by my hotel and pick-up Monique? It's on the way to Monte Carlo. I have to leave to warm-up and prepare for the

concert. Hausenstockmann wants me there at six-thirty. Monique won't be ready for another hour. The concert is at eight-thirty.

—Ben. Have you forgotten? Monique cold-cocked Isabella in a fight at the rue de Paris apartment. There's no way I'm going to have two women in formal gowns fighting in a car one of them is driving.

—You're right. I'll drive Monique back to our hotel after the gala, but now I have this transportation problem getting us both to Monte Carlo.

Ben hung up and looked at Monique. She was sitting at the dressing table adjusting the fit of her new bra, which involved taking it off and on several times.

—Monique, if I stay here any longer watching you play with that brassiere, I'm going to have to ravish you. I must leave for the gig. What are we going to do about a ride for you to Monte Carlo?

—I'm sure someone on the hotel staff will be more than happy to drive me. You are a celebrity of sorts.

—I hadn't thought of that. I'll go see Michel, the owner.

When Ben returned he told Monique that Carmen, the wife of the owner, would be pleased to drive her to the concert. In fact, since Olivia Krackenthorpe's mother did not make the trip, Ben had an extra comp. He called the box office and put Carmen's name on the comp list in place of Beverly Krackenthorpe's.

—Play well, Ben.

—I hope you don't make me nervous. I can't wait to see you dressed up in those glad rags. I love that new coif, it is so sassy and sexy. He turned to her. Give me a kiss, please sweetheart.

—A chaste one. I spent a lot of money on this make-up loverman.

Monique gave Ben a tiny peck on the lips. Ben reached to give her a hug.

—Not now, Ben. I have to get ready and you will be late.

Ben pouted then grabbed the two saxophone cases for his performance in the Ravel and finessed his contrabass clarinet into his left hand.

—You are not playing the concert dressed like *that* are you? asked Monique. Ben was wearing jeans, a sweat shirt and a leather jacket.

—No, no. I wear a white jump suit for *Constellations* and regular concert attire for the orchestra when I join them in Ravel's *Bolero*. My clothes are in my dressing room back stage.

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Anatoly Gringovitch and his family sat in the hotel dining room. His wife, Francesca, was furious with the hotel over the robbery of their suite. The only missing items were two of her husband's paintings, but she felt personally violated since her intimate apparel and toiletries had been scattered about the suite. She had to hold her tongue because her sons were excitedly relating their adventures on the aquarium ecologic cruise they had made that day.

—Monsieur Gringovitch? said a bell captain.

—Oui.

—There is a telephone call for you in the lobby. Do you care to take it now?

—Do you know who is calling?

—A Monsieur Arris.

—Francesca, I have to take this. Boys, try to curb your enthusiasm. This is a French hotel restaurant, not an Italian playground. Mezzo, mezzo, he said putting a finger to his lips.

Gringovitch walked into the lobby and was directed to a distant phone cabine.

—Hey Dan. What's happenin'? said Gringovitch putting a positive spin on his greeting.

—Nothing good and you know it.

—Whatever are you talking about? I gave Isabella the painting. Didn't you sell it?

—You and I both know it was one of the copies. Where is the original?

—Didn't you get my telegram two weeks ago? You should have received it at the Ritz. I sent a telegram to you and to Ben. I screwed up and accidentally sent the real Gorky with Clarone. He has it in his bank vault at Crédit Agricole in Nice.

—Not funny Anatoly.

—Isabella Sanitizzare and Lena Koshka both viewed it not a week ago at the bank. Ask Isabella.

—Even more not funny. Isabella told me she saw only two of your paintings. Now, Isabella is dead so she can't confirm your story. She was brutally raped and murdered by a serial killer last night

Gringovitch stopped breathing for what seemed like a long time.

—No way! You're bull shitting me, Arris.

—I'm afraid I'm not. She left the apartment on rue de Paris in a body bag.

—She was very alive yesterday when she took the Gorky to the meeting you had with Aghajanian.

—Why didn't you tell Isabella it was a copy?

—On your instructions, Dan. You warned both Clarone and me that mums the word about copies. Now my sales to the Contemporary Art Museum in Nice will be difficult without Isabella's help. I stand to lose thousands. Tens of thousands.

—Tough titty, Anatoly. There's worse. Lena Koshka suspects the Gorky she saw at the rue de Paris apartment was a copy. She wants to examine it again on Monday. Aghajanian is hot to buy the painting, but wants her opinion on its authenticity.

—That's an easy fix. Monday we'll get the original from Ben's vault and take it to Lena Koshka. Where's the copy? You still have that?

—That's another problem. No one knows what happened to the copy we showed Aghajanian. I brought it down from the apartment and put it in the car. It has disappeared. Someone is playing with our game plan. I suspect you or Clarone.

—I haven't been near Nice and Clarone has the real Gorky in his bank vault. Why would he want a copy? Relax, Dan. I'm sure it will show up

There was a long pause as both men were sizing up each other's motives.

—Look, said Gringovitch, what do you want me to do? You are the dealer of record for this sale.

—Gringovitch, don't play with me. My patience is running thin. Have you forgotten that we also have a buyer for the copy?

—If you don't find the copy, we'll make a big announcement about the sale to Aghajanian and tell the other buyer he was out bid.

—Not part of the plan. The plan was to sell the original and a copy. The second copy was to be discovered in a year or two in Yolande's bistro when the gouache peeled off.

—Yes, but Yolande's was bombed. Clarone took that copy to Découvrir Art where Dente was supposed to remove the gouache.

—That copy was destroyed in a fire Friday night.

—Really?

—Yes. I drove late last night to Marseille to see if the painting was OK. It was mostly burnt. I think it was a suspicious fire.

—Are you sure it was a copy that was burnt? Because of the mix-up Ben had the original and the copy.

—There was enough left for me to verify that it was copy number one. I have it in my hotel room. Copy number two was what I showed Aghajanian yesterday.

There was a long silence.

—Arris, it sounds like you have some powerful enemies. Are you sure your KGB friends aren't exacting some revenge on you?

—Let's not discuss my past. Past is past. Present is present.

—Did I tell you someone ransacked our suite in the hotel today? They stole two of *my* still wet oil paintings.

—I may not be the only one with enemies, Anatoly. Are you sure it wasn't some irate cuckold who stole your paintings? It's no secret that you have a reputation as a roving husband who woos and beds beautiful women.

—Maybe it was the same guy who killed your wife Claudia in the Ritz.

Gringovitch could hear Arris coughing.

—That would be our buddy, Clarone, said Arris with some heat. The guy *you* insisted on bringing on board as a courier because you felt sorry for him. Like most grifters, Clarone took us for easily duped stoolies.

—I think you've got that wrong, Dan. Clarone is wet behind the ears. Great musician yes, but grifter and swindler, no way. He and I go back a lifetime.

—Stop protecting him, Anatoly. I'm sure Clarone's behind all this. I know he and Isabella were partners. It would have been cake for Isabella to seduce Clarone and work a deal. In fact I found a receipt for 25,000 francs. Money Isabella used to buy Clarone.

—Arris, said Gringovitch, you need to take it easy. You'll blow a blood vessel working yourself up like this. You are getting more outrageous by the minute.

—Don't tell me how to behave. I know what I know. I'll see you tonight at the gala. We'll grill Clarone then.

—Enough. I've got to calm to my family. Francesca is a wreck after the break-in to our suite. I'm arranging for us to move to another suite.

—Don't try any tricks, like skipping town. I'll see you tonight at the gala.

—Take it easy Dan. The Gorky is safe. Everything will work out. You, my friend, are the one with a missing Gorky on your hands.

Gringovitch hung up before Arris could reply. Anatoly hoped Arris would not blow the whole deal with his impetuous accusations. He needed the money from the sale of the Gorky to purchase his Rome studio. But now, his most pressing problem was Olivia Krackenthorpe's murder. He had to be a suspect. There was something wrong with the colonel and lieutenant who interrogated him in Olivia's suite. That ray gun story was right out of a Flash Gordon comic book. The lieutenant never took a statement from him, the Lieutenant had walked away without a statement. Who were those guys? Who *was* Olivia Krackenthorpe? Where were the nude drawings he did of her? Who broke into *his* suite and stole *his* paintings? Why? Francesca knew he was loyal, if not exactly sexually faithful. What was going to be in the papers tomorrow? Seamy headlines flashed through his mind.

To be continued.

