Five Million Yen: Chapter 67

by Daniel Harris

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Anatoly Gringovitch sat in the police car returning him to the Opera House. Gringovitch could not believe that Ben Clarone would shoot Dan Arris. It never occurred to him that Ben owned a gun much less knew how to shoot one. The initial reports had to be wrong. Gringovitch knew that Arris owned at least one gun and frequently had it on his person or in his car. Maybe it was a good thing that he missed the performance, Anatoly thought. He might have been back stage in Ben's dressing room and been a target. But whose target: Arris or Clarone? Maybe Arris tried to shoot Ben and was shot in a struggle with Ben. That seems a more likely scenario.

There were half a dozen police vehicles in front of the opera house, which was part of Garnier's grand plan of casino and opera house. Gringovitch thought it a bit of an oxymoron to listen to Hausenstocknann's *avant-garde* twentieth century music in an ornate *Belle Époque* opera house. But Monte Carlo's opera house had seen many world premières, though probably none whose aesthetics clashed so thoroughly with the venue.

—Remember, Monsieur Gringovitch, said the sergeant driving the car, you are restricted to the confines of Monaco until the court releases you. If you wish to leave Monaco for a few hours, you must inform the police, who may not grant you permission.

—Yes, I know, said Gringovitch. I told the Captain I would need to travel to Nice to sell some paintings. As you have informed me, my dealer, Dan Arris, is indisposed. They said they would assign someone to escort me. I hope they would not be in uniform.

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—Since you are under house arrest, most likely a non-uniformed person will accompany you.

—That would be a kindness, said Gringovitch.

The driver parked the car at the end of the line of police vehicles.

—Do you know Arris's condition? said Gringovitch.

—The last update I heard, Arris was wounded in the shoulder. Apparently, Arris tried to shoot Ben Clarone, but was disarmed by a visiting New York City police officer who was protecting Ben Clarone's girlfriend from the paparazzi. It seems Clarone kicked the gun, which was on the floor, away from Arris and it discharged. Arris was taken to hospital. I suspect he will be moved to the prison hospital once charges are filed. Attempted murder is a serious crime.

—Even knowing someone who has been murdered is difficult enough as I have discovered, said Gringovitch.

—The drawings you made for us were superb, said the Captain. Thank you very much. We hope to apprehend the persons who stole Mademoiselle Krackenthorpe's body. These drawings will be most helpful. We also very much appreciated the drawings you made of Olivia Krackenthorpe. We will return them to you at the end of the investigation.

—Yes, she liked them very much, said Gringovitch. Now I must find my family.

Gringovitch walked into the opera house confused. Why did Arris try to murder Clarone? Would Arris also try to murder me? he thought. Was Arris aware that the *real* Gorky was in Ben's bank vault?

—Did my wife leave a ticket for tonight's concert for me with you? said Gringovitch to the box office clerk.

—Your name?

—Anatoly Gringovitch.

—Yes, here it is. They are resetting the stage for the Ravel. If you hurry the usher will show you to your seat.

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Igor Marcevicz was very generous granting solo bows after Ravel's *Bolero*. Each wind player who played the famous melody as a solo was asked to stand and be recognized by the audience. When Marcevicz motioned to Ben to stand for his soprano and tenor saxophone solos, there was a huge swelling of applause with shouts of “Bravo!” from the audience and the orchestra. Ben was all similes. One would never know someone had tried to assassinate him not thirty minutes before. Monique cheered from her seat and marveled that Ben could be so cool after such a close call. She also wondered what caused Dan Arris to want to shoot Ben. Was Ben a gangster? Was he involved in something illegal? Much as she was proud of Ben, she was worried about their future relationship. Her first husband, the canal boat captain, was always involved in shady deals and illegal activities. She didn't need a repeat performance of her first marriage. Maybe she loved the *idea* of Ben, but not the *actuality* of Ben.

—Monique, Ben was incredible tonight, said Carmen. You must be so happy.

—Oh, yes, said Monique, trying to hide her doubts. He is the best. Why, just ask him sometime!

—Monique, don't be so mean, said Carmen. Ben is a wonderful man and so in love with you. I've never seen a man so sick at heart as when you were going through all those troubles in Buenos Aries. He absolutely adores you.

—Carmen, he is wonderful, but I don't know him well enough to make a commitment. Now, I want to go backstage and see him.

—You are going to the gala, aren't you? said Carmen.

—Of course, said Monique. I didn't buy this outfit to sit in the balcony. I need to find out what kind of dancer Ben Clarone is. If he can't dance, I don't want him.

—Monique! said Carmen in mock horror, I hope you are not serious.

—Just you watch me dance, said Monique with a big grin. All the men and boys will want to dance with me, especially in this peak-a-boo skirt.

—Monique Zwaan? said Lieutenant Giles LaPonti, Nice Police.

—Oh, Lieutenant LaPonti, said Monique, surprised to see him, and in dress uniform.

—I'm here to replace Monsieur Mulvihill, said LaPonti, hoping that Monique would pick up his cues and not blurt out anything about the incident in Ben's dressing room. As you know he has other business to attend to at this time. So, it is up to me to escort you past all the *paparazzi* and other snoopy members of the fourth estate.

—Ah, yes Lieutenant. May I introduce Carmen Fréchaut? She is the owner with her husband, of the Hôtel Select in Beaulieu-sur-Mer where I am staying.

—*Enchanté*, Madame Fréchaut, said LaPonti with a bow. Shall I escort you ladies to Monsieur Clarone?

—Why, thank you, said Carmen.

Backstage was confusion. Musicians leaving the theater, stage hands setting the hall for tomorrow's Hausenstockmann performance, friends, reporters, *paparazzi*, security personnel, Monte Carlo Police, wives, girlfriends, and hangers-on. When LaPonti, Carmen and Monique descended to the lower level to Ben's dressing room, they found a long line of admirers at his door. The door was closed. LaPonti led Carmen and Monique to the head of the line and rapped loudly on the door. A Monte Carlo police officer in full uniform of a sergeant opened the door a crack.

—Lieutenant LaPonti, Nice Police, said LaPonti. I have Mademoiselle Zwaan with me.

—I'm sorry Lieutenant, but no one is allowed into this room until the Colonel gives the order.

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—Monsieur Clarone, why would Monsieur Arris want to shoot you? asked the Colonel of the Monte Carlo Police.

—I have no idea, said Ben in a calm voice.

—In my experience, said the Colonel, one does not murder someone unless it is sex or money. Did you have sex with his wife, or did you cheat him out of money?

Ben looked at the colonel. He knew the colonel was a clever man. Even if Arris was out of the picture, he still had to deal with Gringovitch, as far as the Gorky painting was concerned, the less the colonel knew the better. It was best if he confessed to sex with Claudia rather than compromise the painting deal.

—I had sex with Arris's wife, but at the time she said she was divorced from Arris and was a free woman.

—Just where did this take place? On a plane…or?

—Actually on the train from Marseille to Paris. We met several times on planes. As you know, she was a stewardess for Pan Am. When I flew to Nice, I didn't know she was married to Arris. She told me she was a “free” woman.

—Did Arris know you were having sexual relations with his wife?

—At the time, said Ben trying to gage the Colonel's knowledge, I didn't know Claudia even knew Dan Arris, much less that she was legally married to him.

The Colonel stood up. Walking around the room, studying Ben in the mirror.

—You entered France as Benjamin Adoyan, said the Colonel. Is that not correct?

—I'm not about to question your information, said Ben.

—If you *were* Ben Clarone, why would you enter France as Benjamin Adoyan?

—All my identification papers were stolen in New York City. I needed to travel to Monte Carlo for this musical engagement. Dan Arris supplied me with passports and other documents.

—Why would he be interested enough in you to supply you with excellent counterfeit passports, drivers license, and whatever else?

—He wanted me to deliver two paintings to Nice, France. He was going to sell them. He *is* an art dealer. Time was short.

—You were desperate?

—Well, when I talked to him, I needed a job. I also needed to travel to Monte Carlo. Arris offered me a flight to Nice, if I would take the two Gringovitch paintings to Nice.

—And did you do that?

—Of course, it was my job.

—You mean, the delivery was a job for money?

—There will be no money until the sale of the paintings. I have known Gringovitch for over twenty years. I did it for him.

—Did you know Gringovitch was a KGB agent?

—That's bullshit. He's as American as apple pie.

—He murdered a British female spy earlier today.

—You're trying to trap me. That's nonsense. Gringovitch is a sylvan creature. He wouldn't hurt anyone. Don't play these games with me.

The Colonel took a chair and sat so he could see Ben's profile in the dressing room mirror.

—Do you know Olivia Krackenthorpe?

—I met her and her mother in Paris at the Ritz. She was supposed to attend tonight's performance.

—Your friend, Gringovitch, murdered her this afternoon. He's a KGB spy. She's a British spy. It's of little interest to us. Super powers play games in Monte Carlo. So, tell me why did Arris want to kill you?

—I don't know. I did everything he asked me to do. I delivered the paintings to Nice.

—Why did you travel to **Découvrir Art** in Marseille? We know you delivered one of the paintings to that address.

—The paintings needed some final treatments. I don't know anything about painting, but Arris told me to take one of the paintings to **Découvrir Art**.

—Final treatments?

—Well, they were new, and needed to be varnished.

—Did you order work from any of the employees at **Découvrir Art**?

—No, I was only the messenger.

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—If Ben's in trouble, I don't want any part of this, said Monique to LaPonti.

—I think the police are confirming what happened. They may want to question you also.

—I don't want to do that.

—I can take you to the Casino and you can wait there for Monsieur Clarone to arrive for the gala. The gala is in the *salle de banquet* at the Casino.

—I think so. I am a little upset, said Monique.

—Understandably, said LaPonti. Carmen, do you wish to come with us?

—Yes. It is a little uncomfortable waiting here.

Just then the door to Ben's dressing room opened and two police officers left.

—Monsieur Clarone can greet you now, said the Sergeant to the crowd.

The line surged forward. Ben stood putting the soprano saxophone in its case. He turned to see Monique leaving with a man that looked like Giles LaPonti. Poor Monique, she was not having a good night. Ben laid the soprano sax in its case and hurried after Monique.

—Monique!

LaPonti and Monique stopped and turned. Ben walked briskly up to them. He took Monique in his arms and gave her a big hug.

—Come into my dressing room and help me greet these people, said Ben.

—Yes, Monique, said LaPonti. I'll try to keep the paparazzi away.

—I see they found you some shoes, said Ben. These shoes work well with your outfit.

—They belonged to Maria Callas. She wore them here in a performance of *Tosca*. Remind me to return them to the stage manager tomorrow.

Ben was graceful and humble to all the fans that came to congratulate him.

—I need a drink, said Ben. Shall we go to the gala? I will probably have to stand in a reception line, but they told me that there are places for you and I at the head table, Monique.

—Ben, I think you had better remove all the lipstick from your cheeks. Look at your face in the mirror.

Ben turned and saw that his cheeks and neck were covered with lipstick.

—I like that. They are badges for a job well done. At least the ladies thought so.

—Well, I won't be putting my lipstick on your cheeks until you remove the other women's lipstick.

Reluctantly, Ben went to the sink and scrubbed off the lipstick with soap and a washcloth.

—That's much better, Mr. Clarone. Now I can put a big smacker on both cheeks.

Which she did. Ben took her in his arms and gave her a big sensuous kiss on the lips.

—Your lips are so soft Ben. Give me another kiss.

LaPonti turned away and walked out of the dressing room.

—I'll be waiting outside, he said

—Will there be dancing as well as dining? said Monique pirouetting.

—You betcha, sweetheart, said Ben. We're going to show them all how to dance.

The gala featured wonderful food and a terrific band. Ben and Monique were the couple to watch when they danced. When the band played a jitterbug set, Monique was in her element. She knew all the classic moves and steps. By the end of the set she was dancing with three men and Gringovitch's son Zeno.

—And what is your name? said Monique a little out of breath.

—I am Zeno Gringovitch. My father is the famous painter, Anatoly Gringovitch.

—You dance very, very well, said Monique.

—So do you, said Zeno. What is your name?

—Monique Zwaan, like the bird, said Monique.

—You look like a swan in that dress.

—Why, thank you.

—Zeno, are you putting moves on my date? said Ben.

—Com'on Ben, she's the prettiest girl in the room and I'm the best dancer.

Monique and Ben laughed.

—You're going to go far, Zeno, said Monique. Thank you for the dance.

—You're welcome, Madame Zwaan. May I have a kiss?

—Oh, you *are* bold, said Monique, but come here. Monique gave Zeno a big smooch on the cheek, leaving a bright smear of lipstick.

—Zeno, what are you doing? said Anatoly Gringovitch approaching Ben, Zeno and Monique.

—Did you see me dancing with Monique, Slava, Gringovitch's nickname? said Zeno. We were like professionals.

—And how did you get the lipstick on your cheek, young man?

—It was my reward from Monique for being such a good partner.

—Since the band is on break, can I get us some champagne? said Ben.

—I saw a waiter with a tray of drinks a moment ago, said Gringovitch. I'll find him. Zeno, I think your mother wants you to find her. It's time for you and Dante to go to the hotel. Bedtime for you Zeno.

—Slava, Francesca is no fun. Who is going to dance with Monique if I leave?

—I'm sure she will find plenty of partners.

—But I'm the best.

—Zeno, your mother is sitting over there with Dante. I suggest you go immediately. I won't be able to protect you from her. You know she's the boss.

—Yes, Slava. Goodnight Monique.

—Thank you for the dance, Zeno.

The ventriloquist twins, Sophie and Rachel, came up to Ben and Monique.

—Ben you were absolutely amazing, said Sophie. Is this Mrs. Clarone, the television star?

—No, said Ben blushing. This is my very best friend, Monique Zwaan. Monique, meet Sophie and Rachel Kessel. They are both

artists and ventriloquists. I met them at Villa Arson. Sophie put make-up on my black eye. She works as a make-up artist for film and television.

—Pleased to meet you, said Monique. The two girls looked about fifteen years old.

—I see I should have brought more champagne, said Gringovitch handing champagne to Ben and Monique.

—Sophie and Rachel, said Ben, say hello to my great friend, Anatoly Gringovitch.

—*The* Anatoly Gringovitch, the painter? said the twins in unison.

—The very same, said Ben.

—He's very handsome, said a voice.

—Who said that? asked Monique.

—My sister, said the two girls in unison without moving their lips.

—You are always getting me in trouble, Sophie.

—I'm not Sophie, I'm Margot, said Rachel moving her hand on Sophie's back as if Sophie were a ventriloquist's dummy.

—Stop making me say embarrassing things, said Sophie moving her hand on Rachel's back.

—Wait, said Monique. I hear four voices and see only two girls.

—Ah, said Ben, now you know why they call them the riddle twins. Not only do they look alike, sound alike, but also they are both ventriloquists with even more voices.

—Margo, we should leave, said one of Rachel's voices. This guy Clarone is a cad.

—I think he's cute, said Sophie in another voice.

—Stop! I'm totally confused, said Ben.

—Do you want to know something amazing? asked Sophie in her normal voice.

—What's that, said Gringovitch.

—There is an older man here who is also a ventriloquist, said Rachel. We met him a few minutes ago. That's him standing over there talking to Nobokolov.

—Excuse me one minute, said Gringovitch.

Gringovitch went out of the hall and found LaPonti talking to the Captain from the Monte Carlo police.

—Excuse me, said Gringovitch. The man who said he was a colonel in your police force is talking to the Russian bassist, Serge Nobokolov over by the bandstand. He's the one who interrogated me in Olivia Krackenthorpe's suite.

—Are you sure?

—Positive. Look at your copy of my sketch, said Gringovitch.

The captain pushed a button on his radio and quietly issued some commands.

Within two minutes, uniformed and plain-clothes police covered all the exits. Two large security agents dressed in formal attire approached the suspect who was speaking with Nobokolov in Russian.

—Excuse me, sir. Please come with me. There is a call for you outside, said the smaller of the two large men in Russian.

—Please don't make a scene. Walk calmly out this side door, said the larger man.

—What is it you want? There must be some mistake, said Nobokolov. This man is my uncle.

—You may join us, Monsieur Nobokolov, said the bigger man, in Russian. Three large uniformed big men joined them. They all had side arms and radios.

Ben, Monique, the twins and Zeno watched as Nobokolov and the man he was speaking with were escorted out a side door of the *salle de banquet.*

—What's going on here? said Ben.

—They must be police, said Monique.

—Where did Anatoly go? said Zeno. He's not with Francesca.

Monique smiled and tousled Zeno's hair. She loved it when children called their parents by their given names.

—Now you're in trouble, Zeno, said Ben. Here comes Francesca with Dante.

Francesca was a statuesque ash-blonde woman with a full figure. Her complexion was perfect and her prominent cheekbones set off

her large black eyes. Her hair was piled on her head giving her an impressive height. She was wearing a tight black sheath-dress, sans jewelry, which covered her from neck to knee.

—Hello, Ben, said Francesca. Have you seen Anatoly?

—He was here a moment ago, said Ben, but he left in a hurry.

—Ben, will you introduce Sophie and Rachel? said Monique. I know Francesca, but they do not.

—I'm sorry, said Ben. This is Francesca Gringovitch, Anatoly's wife and their oldest son, Dante. Francesca, meet Rachel & Sophie Kessel.

The women all shook hands. Dante, who had the sullen look of a bored and sullen teenager, instantly brightened his expression when he saw Monique's cleavage and short skirt. Monique made a small curtsey to Dante, giving Dante a better view of her cleavage.

—Do you dance, Dante? said Monique. Zeno is a superb dancer.

Dante blushed a scarlet red.

—I think he's a little shy, said Francesca. Boys, it's time for us to go back to our hotel. I don't know where Anatoly is, but he will meet us later.

—Do we have to? said Zeno whining. Monique and I were just getting our moves together.

—Another time, Zeno. I have to dance with my date, Monsieur Clarone, said Monique.

—He's OK, but not as good as I am, said Zeno.

—Zeno, watch your tongue, said Francesca.

—We will always have the memory of our night in Monte Carlo, said Monique to Zeno.

Zeno puffed out his chest, beaming.

—It was good meeting your beautiful friends, Ben, said Francesca. Have a good night. If you see Anatoly, tell him to come to the hotel. Thank you Monique for dancing with Zeno. I think you made quite an impression.

—Next time we'll dance a tango, Zeno, said Monique to the retreating family.

Ben and the three women watched the family group walk away. Zeno gave one last dance move.

—I'll bet Zeno is a handful, said Monique.

—He reminds me of his father when he was young, said Ben. More champagne ladies?

—None for me, Ben. I need to use the powder room, said Monique.

—We'll join you, said the twins to Monique.

—I guess I'll wander around and meet the people, said Ben. Look for me when you return.

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Ben sat at the head table waiting for Monique when Zoë approached.

—Ben, you may remember me, said Zoë.

—I can hardly forget, said Ben. Legally you are still my wife.

—I just want to congratulate you, said Zoë. You played excellently tonight. The bass player was a total turkey. Can I give you a kiss?

Ben was totally taken aback. Except for the scene earlier in his dressing room when Zoë's divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian, served him with divorce papers, he hadn't seen Zoë since July, it was now November.

—Well, I don't see why not. Probably twenty women have left their lipstick on my check tonight.

—Ben, you are such an egomaniac asshole, but I'll give you a kiss anyway, said Zoë, bending down and giving Ben a big kiss on the lips.

Six paparazzi snapped the picture. Monique, who had returned from the powder room looked on in horror. Bent over, Zoë's dress revealed her complete bosom. Without hesitation, Monique pulled Zoë away from Ben.

—Ben's my man now. Keep your cheap lips off, said Monique hissing in a stage whisper.

The paparazzi, who had been stalking Zoë all evening, had a field day. There was a lightening storm of strobe flashes, capturing the trio in dozens of frozen moments.

—You're only the latest girlfriend sweetie, said Zoë, tottering on her heels. I know, I was married to him for the last six years. He's poison. Stay away from him. Do yourself a favor, forget him.

Monique sat down in her chair. Life with Ben was going to be more complicated than she wanted. Strobes from the paparazzi cameras caught all her and Zoë's expressions and body language.

—Zoë, said Ben, if you meant to hurt my friend Monique, you've succeeded. Wait and see how much of the half-million dollar divorce settlement you will ever receive. I will fight you to the end.

—Ben, I'm going to starve you. Monique, this man won't be able to buy you an ice cream cone when I'm through with him.

Monique sat looking at Ben and Zoë. She knew that life with Ben was not possible. She loved him, but her mind knew she had to sever him from her heart. It was over for her and Ben. She would play-act and enjoy herself tonight. Afterall, Ben was a terrific lover, but she would be working aboard Pan Am flight 83 to JFK on Monday morning. Ben would soon become a short but interesting chapter in her life.

To be continued.