

Five Million Yen: Chapter 69

by Daniel Harris

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The Gringovitch family was gathered in the lobby of the hotel. The boys sat on the floor using their packs as back supports. Francesca Gringovitch sat on a chair with the remaining luggage in front of her.

—You have my wife's statement, said Anatoly Gringovitch to the Lieutenant. My wife and children are traumatized. You know Olivia Krackenthorpe's murderer. I want permission to drive my wife and sons to our home in Rome. I have business in Nice on Monday morning. I will return tomorrow night, actually today by eight tonight.

—It is an eight-hour drive to Roma. It is now three in the morning. You are going to drive to Roma and return in sixteen hours?

—Yes, and I must. My family is totally shattered by the events tonight.

—You must sign some papers, said the Lieutenant.

—I'll sign, but get the papers here now!

—These things take time, said the Lieutenant.

—We don't have time. You have failed my family, said Francesca rising from her chair and approaching the Lieutenant menacingly. You are incompetent idiots. You know this woman has been dead in this hotel since Saturday afternoon. What kind of fools are you?

—I'm so sorry, Madame Gringovitch, but I have orders. The law must be obeyed. Your husband was a suspect in the murder of Olivia Karackenthorpe. He is under house arrest and must stay within the

confines of Monaco until the magistrate releases him. On Sunday, the magistrate court is not in session until noon. That will be in nine hours.

—Well, I'm leaving, said Francesca. Slava, you can stay here, I'm taking the boys in the car and driving to Roma.

—Francesca, be reasonable. I will drive you.

—This whole trip was a disaster. The sooner I am back in Roma, the better. I'm leaving with the boys now. Either you drive, or you stay. But we are leaving.

—Easy Francesca, I will take the train on Monday after I sell my paintings. You drive the boys to Roma, but please be careful, the tunnels are tricky at night. If it rains, avoid the puddles. I'll see you Tuesday morning in Roma, with a fat wallet.

—And I hope a clean conscience, said Francesca.

—Yes, dear, said Gringovitch. Zeno, keep you mother alert. It is a long drive. Talk to her the whole time. Tell her stories.

—Yes, papa, but Dante is afraid.

—Dante, now is the time to be the older brother you are. Keep your younger brother Zeno talking, but no fighting.

—Yes, papa. I'm afraid.

—Don't be afraid, Francesca is an excellent driver.

—No, I'm afraid of dead naked women.

—Yes, Dante, that is a problem. Trust me, dead naked women will come no more

Anatoly helped load the car. The Lieutenant tried to assist, but Francesca shooed him away.

—*Basta!* she said with real hatred.

* * *

Ben looked at the bedside clock. It said eleven in the morning. He had to get moving. The concert was at two and he had to shower, shave and drive to Monaco and warm up. Monique was sound asleep. She had taken the full measure of Ben's lovemaking. She slept with a slight smile on her face.

Ben left a note:

Dearest Monique-

I had to leave for the concert. If you need money for food or shopping, ask Carmen, I gave her 500 francs. I will return between 5 and 6 tonight!

Love you dearly,

Ben

* * *

Ben arrived at the Opera just as the Russian bassist, Serge Nobokolov stepped through the stage door.

—No hard feelings, Ben. I was off my game last night, said Nobokolov, giving Ben a palm slap.

—Serge, it's only about the music. I've had those moments myself.

—Thank you. You saved my ass so many times last night.

—No, Serge, you rallied and were spectacular at the end.

—That's kind of you, but I was schnoekered and stoned, he said twisting his nose with his fist.

—Been there, done that, said Ben. Tonight we nail it.

—Let's hope the orchestra does also.

Ben and Serge played as if they were glued together. Everything clicked. The orchestra, after last night's fiasco with Nobokolov, was generally good. A few players missed some notes, but the overall performance brought out the brilliance of Hausenstockmann's score.

At intermission, Gringovitch visited Ben in his dressing room.

—Ben, you were astounding. You and Nobokolov were from some other planet, so good, brilliant.

—Thanks, bro. It was a big improvement over last night. Is the family here? I'd love to see Zeno. He's a special kid.

—Sadly, no. There was an unbelievable crisis: Francesca came into our new hotel room and found the naked dead body of Olivia Krackenthorpe in our bed with a wad of 100-dollar bills in her crotch. She and the boys left for Roma as soon as the police allowed them to leave. I spoke to her on the telephone. She arrived at my

Rome studio at noon. You will have to take the original Gorky back to Brooklyn with you.

—Jesus, Slava, don't do this to me. I'm trying to keep my life unencumbered by questionable art fandangos. Monique already suspects I'm involved in some smarmy art deal.

There was an awkward silence.

—So ... did you bone Olivia? said Ben making an obscene gesture.

—Three times, said Gringovitch. She broke two condoms; she was some kind of hip thruster.

Ben gave Slava a fist bump.

—You adulterous dog, you, said Ben. Gringovitch, the Russian stud.

—So will you take the painting to Brooklyn?

—I don't know. It could be risky. Do I return as Adoyan or Clarone? Who am I?

—Ben, you must do this for me. You can't leave the Gorky in your bank vault. If Arris talks, the police will obtain a court order to open your vault. When I sell the Gorky to Aghajanian tomorrow, I can't be found afterward taking the original to Rome.

—You're putting me in a tough position, Slava. Do I appease Monique or remain loyal to you?

—Why does she have to know. You told me she's leaving Monday morning and your leaving Wednesday or Thursday.

—I just don't want to screw this up, said Ben. I am totally in love with her. She suspects you are doing some underhanded art deal and that I'm involved. I'd like to bail on the art part of our relationship.

—Come on, man! You're in this too deep, said Gringovitch exasperated. You can't bail out now. Take the Gorky to my Brooklyn home. For all your trouble, which has been really no trouble at all, you're probably going to leave France with nearly hundred grand. Almost all of it tax free cash.

—You're putting me in a tough spot, said Ben. Monique paid a big price. She came close to being disappeared in Buenos Aires by thug friends of Isabella Sanitizzare's. She was kidnapped and held

hostage in Nice by Arris, and then last night she was next to me when Arris tried to gun me down in this very room!

—What's that got to do with you finishing the job you started? Take your horn, the painting and fly to JFK. Are you such a paranoid egomaniac that you think every customs agent and cop is looking for you?

—It feels that way. I wasn't ever supposed to be couriering a painting *back* to Brooklyn,

—Sorry, Ben, said Gringovitch, as far as customs and immigration are concerned, you're just another musician returning to the U.S. from a gig in Europe. Get over it. No one is looking for you. The police *have* Arris in jail for murder. I'm under house arrest in Monaco. You're the only free man.

* * *

Ben called Hôtel Select in Beaulieu-sur-Mer. He asked to talk to Monique, who was staying in his room.

—Allo?

—Monique, it's Ben.

—Ben, I was hoping this was you. How did the concert go?

—Amazingly. Nobokolov apologized for last night and he played great this afternoon. Are we on for dinner?

—I ate an hour ago, so I'm not hungry. But you have a message from Mr. Green.

—A message from Mr. Green? said Ben.

—I'll read it to you: "Mr. Brown: Ce soir á Bar Oiseaux. Bird. Saxophone ténor et soprano. Neuf. Bises. Mr. Green."

—Ah, Lezardino wants me to play with his band tonight at Bar Oiseaux, said Ben.

—Why so cryptic? Ben, I have been worried that you were involved with criminal elements.

—Monique, not to worry. He means we'll be playing bebop. I will play tenor and soprano saxophone; Bar Oiseaux at nine o'clock. Kisses, Lezardino. Did he leave a callback number?

—No, I read the entire message.

—Bird is Charlie “Bird” Parker, the genius of bebop jazz. Lezardino is telling me it's a bebop gig, so bring good fingers and big ears. Do you want to go? You went last time I played with his band.

—Ben, I have to work tomorrow. I'm exhausted. You forget I was tied up in a closet for over eight hours. You play your gig and I'll see you when you return to the hotel later tonight.

—I need to stop by the hotel on my way to Nice. Will you be there and awake?

—Of course, sweetheart.

—Okay, I'll see you in thirty minutes. I should shower and change clothes. Maybe you could have a glass of wine with me while I have dinner.

—Why don't you eat at the club? I don't feel like getting dressed. I only have a foul Pan Am stewardess skirt to wear. You will have to get my dry cleaning first thing tomorrow morning. I have to be at the airport by 11.

—Okay, I'll still see you for a kiss in thirty minutes.

* * *

Bar Oiseaux was packed. Ben could barely find a place for his horn cases. It was an all-star band: Carmine Bezor, trumpet; Clovis “Balls” Pennymaker, trombone; Ben, saxophones; Lezardino, vibraphone; Patrice Pomme, piano; and Octavo Zarfos on percussion. It was the typical Lezardino atypical jazz band. Late in the second set Nobokolov arrived with an electric bass and supplied some funky bass lines. Ben picked up on the groove. Clovis added some ‘bone riffs. The band got down and funky. The clever Lezardino added another dimension to the world of jazz that night. The gig, which started out as an outing in bebop featuring tunes by Parker and Monk, morphed into funk/salsa/blues/noise meets jazz jam.

When the set was done, Ben gave Nobokolov a high five.

—For a bunch of new music geeks, we tore up this place, said Ben to Nobokolov.

—This band is wild, said Nobokolob. We should take it on the road.

Lez came up to the two men.

—I'm sorry all I can pay is 200 francs. It's embarrassing to me.

—Hey, Lez, forget the money tonight. It was too much fun to ask for money, said Nobokolov.

—Yeah, Lez, give my part of the take to Pat Pomme, said Ben, He's the musical genius here and we know he needs the cash.

—Yes, said Nobokolov, Pat Pomme's solo on Monk's *Criss Cross* should have been recorded for the vault.

—Ben, said Carmine Bezor approaching the three men. Hey, man you guys played great. That duo between Ben and Lez on *KoKo* was smokin'. It was too fast to be human.

—Thanks, Carmine. It's all Lez's fault. He started it, said Ben.

—Yeah, but then you started showboating in double time, said Lez, so I just took that as our new tempo.

—Sorry I missed that, said Nobokolov.

—What was that sharp claque sound you made, Lez? asked Carmine.

—That was a riding crop on the resonators, said Lez. Got your attention didn't it?

They all laughed.

—Ben, I was going to ask you: Do you want me to take Arno Donax's soprano and tenor back to the shop? That way, you won't have to make a special trip.

—That would be great, said Ben. Have you heard how Arno's doing?

—Not good, I'm afraid, said Carmine. They put him in an induced coma, again.

—Ouch! I was going to stop by the hospital to thank him before I left for New York.

—I'll give him your thanks when I see him and he's conscious. You gave his horns a good workout, tonight.

—His tenor is really sweet. It sounded well in the Ravel with the orchestra and had plenty of power to cut through this crazy band.

* * *

It was 2:30 in the morning when Ben crept into Ben and Monique's room at Hôtel Select. He reeked of cigarette smoke and pastis.

—Ben, said Monique half asleep. Don't turn the light on, but wake me at seven.

—Sorry I'm so late, but we played until almost two.

—Take a shower and snuggle with me, said Monique half into her pillow.

Ben showered then spooned next to Monique.

—What's with the panties? said Ben.

—My period started. Snuggle, put your hands on my breasts.

Ben nuzzled her neck and cupped her breasts.

—You smell good, Ben, said Monique. I like the soap you use.

—I love the smell of your hair. It has the freshness of a sea breeze.

—It's my Dutch blood, said Monique.

* * *

The rain started at six o'clock, Monday morning. Ben woke and closed the windows.

—What time is it? said Monique.

—Five after six, said Ben.

—Come back to bed until seven, and hold me.

Monique's alarm clock went off at exactly seven.

—Ugh, said Ben. I felt fine at six, but now I'm groggy. How are you sweetheart?

—Still tired. Why don't you use the bathroom and then wake me when you leave to go to the dry cleaners. It is the cleaners across from the park around the corner. The tickets are on the dressing table.

Ben returned from the dry cleaners, stopped in the hotel dining room and ordered coffee and croissants be sent to the room.

—You are so sweet to think of breakfast, said Monique.

—Well, I have to meet Gringovitch at my bank at nine sharp. I have two of his paintings in my vault, which he is going to sell to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. Lena Koshka, Modern Art Acquisitions Curator is meeting us at my bank. I'll be back here to take you to the airport at ten.

—Don't be late. You know when it's raining, traffic is very slow. I'm supposed to check in two hours before flight time.

—I won't fail you, said Ben giving her a kiss on the top of her head.

—Ben, now I have croissant hair! said Monique in mock horror

—You're fine. Not a crumb in sight, said Ben. But, I have to run.

* * *

—Thank god it's not Italy, said Gringovitch as Ben approached *Crédit Agricole*. Italian banks sometimes never open on rainy days.

—How did you get here? asked Ben.

—Train. I was released from house arrest last night, said Gringovitch. Are you going to join me in Lena's office in Villa Arson?

—I think I'll pass. I have no desire to see Zoë or her lawyer. Also, I have to take Monique to the airport. She has to be there by eleven, so *a presto mon ami*, said Ben mixing his languages.

—A late lunch perhaps? said Gringovitch.

—I'll call you at Lena's office. But, should we fail to connect, how will I get my money? When are you leaving for Rome?

—On the eight o'clock train, unless I can catch an earlier one.

—Did you remember the Brooklyn house keys?

—Here they are, my friend. Remember, do not use the top lock.

—Got it, said Ben. What about my money?

—Right. Call Lena's office around noon, if we can't do lunch, we'll meet here.

—You wouldn't stiff me would you? said Ben.

—No way brother. But you have to take the Gorky to Brooklyn.

* * *

Ben pulled up to *Hôtel Select* at exactly 9:59. Monique was standing just inside the door.

—That was close, Mr. Clarone, said Monique consulting her watch.

—Never missed a downbeat in my life, said Ben with a big smile.

Ben took her small Pan Am suitcase and her gala dress in a dry cleaner bag and placed them in the car.

—You have everything? said Ben. Money, wallet, passport, clothes?

—Yes, I've checked my list twice, said Monique. You forget, I'm a frequent traveler.

—You look delicious, said Ben. I'm already jealous of all the men who are going to enjoy your beauty on the flight to JFK while I'm sweating in a recording session.

Monique didn't answer. She stared blankly at a rainsquall darkening the lumpy gray Mediterranean.

—Ben, she said biting her lower lip, there's something I need to tell you. I don't want you to get mad, but I need some time to think about us. I mean us as a couple. I love you, but too many horrific things have happened to me, which were caused by my relationship to you. I need time to sort out whether I want to nurture our relationship or sever it. I'm so sorry.

—What does this mean? said Ben.

Monique began to quietly weep. She dabbed at the tears on her cheeks with a tissue.

—I don't want you to telephone me or see me. When I have figured things out, I'll contact you. I have the number of your service.

—You know, Monique, this is devastating to me, said Ben, his face sagging under the weight of her announcement.

—It's not easy to tell you these things. You have to be free of Zoë before we can even think of rekindling our relationship. I can't have those horrid paparazzi following me around. I will lose my job. I may have lost it already.

—They can fire you for that?

—Girls have been fired for less.

—What would you do?

—I'll find something. There's always work for someone who speaks several languages. I am a Dutch national, so I would have to leave New York and move to Holland. If I'm fired, Pan Am will have my U.S. work visa revoked.

Ben concentrated on his driving. People were driving like idiots, swerving to avoid big puddles, double-parking, no signal lane changes, etc. It was an obstacle course. He dreaded the upcoming final scene at the airport. Traffic was backed up at the terminal.

—When we arrive at Departures, I'll jump out and take my things. I don't want a scene, or be photographed by paparazzi, said Monique, her voice hardening with each word.

Ben didn't reply. He double-parked in front of the departure area. Monique got out, took her suitcase, the gala dress and walked into the terminal. She was lost to Ben in a crowd of umbrellas and wet overcoats.

To be continued.

