

# Five Million Yen: Chapter 7

*by* Daniel Harris

*Ben Clarone, a musician, has just arrived home in New York City from an exhausting three-month world tour. He has little cash and a check for five million yen. Things are not as he expects.*

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Ben woke when the rain hit his face. It wasn't real rain, but that spitting rain of a flagging nor'easter. More wind than rain.

He shouldered his pack and headed up Stillwell Avenue to the train station. He had a dollar, but wanted to keep it for as long as possible. I'll see if I can jump the fare.

When he entered the station two transit cops were standing by the turnstiles.

-Not much chance of jumping the fare now.

He looked at the clock. It was almost four in the morning. One of the cops looked at his watch. After a few words they sauntered out of the station. Ben jumped the turnstile and looked for the next train to leave. There was a Broadway N train with its doors open. Looked like his ride.

Ben boarded the train. There was no one in the car. There were at least ten pictures of Zoë advertising *I'd Rather Not*.

I guess she hit it big. She has her picture all over the city.

It took about fifteen minutes for the train to leave. It was an hour before it reached Times Square. Ben went upstairs and got on the Grand Central Shuttle.

Walking through the tunnel to Grand Central he tuned his ears for a good acoustic. He found a place and staked a claim. He took out his penny whistle and started playing *The Irish Washerwoman*. It sounded good and resonant here at this place.

He was feeling pretty hungry. David's soup and the slice had worn off. At least the penny whistle didn't take much energy to blow. Not like playing hard bop on a baritone sax.

There were a smelly lot of homeless people sleeping in the tunnel. One of them approached Ben.

-Hey buddy, you're not the regular guy. He's not going to be happy when he finds you here.

-We'll sort that out when he gets here.

Ben knew the street and subway musicians had set territories and were very protective. As Coleman Hawkins described his younger days, you had to be a great player and a good fighter. Ben felt up to the task. Let's hope the guy isn't too big.

Sure enough, ten minutes later a dude with a trumpet case shows up. He looked worse than the homeless people. He's a junky for sure.

-Hey man, what you doin' in my place?

-Don't see your name, my friend.

-This is my spot. Has been for two years. You gotta earn a place, man.

-Well, my man, I'm just passin' through, but I need some coin. What about we alternate. You play. I play. Maybe we'll make more money that way.

-What are you playing there? A toy tin whistle. You must be crazy.

-Crazy like a fox, brother.

-Just get off my space.

-Bro, when your chops give out, I can jump in and keep the money flowing. Let's just try it.

-I ain't pooling the earnings. You ain't gonna make shit with that tin whistle.

-We shall see my friend.

Ben realized he had no case or cup for money.

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and laid it on top of his pack.

The trumpet player looked at him like he was a piece of three-day old cod.

-I give you an hour. Prime time's eight. You're not making any money by seven thirty, you're outta here.

-Sounds like a deal.

The junky sat down with his back against the wall staring at his case as if he were trying to levitate his trumpet out of the case. Ben started playing *Danny Boy*.

-That slow shit don't work whistle man.

Ben kept playing.

Three big Irish construction workers came by. One of them tossed a dollar on Ben's handkerchief. The junky grabbed it.

-Hey, man, you said no splitting tips. That's my bread.

-Fuck you. It's rent for my space..

Ben could see this guy was going to be trouble. He wished he were wearing his patent leather dress shoes with the pointed toes. These Adidas sneaks couldn't deliver much of a message.

Ben kept playing. About five minutes later a woman dropped a quarter on his handkerchief.

The junky snatched it.

Ben, spun and with the full force of his body delivered a kick under the junky's chin. He crumpled.

Ben took the buck and a quarter from his hand.

A big homeless guy came up to Ben.

-Hey, asshole, that was his money fair and square.

-Bull shit, his horn isn't even out of the case. It's my bread dude.

-It's his space, so it's his money.

The logic of the impoverished was amazing. Like Rita telling me I owed her fifty cents for a token after she stole five million yen from me. Who did this trumpet player think he was, the landlord? Was this big guy his rent collector?

-He told me, no pooling tips. Never said anything about how he was renting public property.

-Well, I'm here to make it right.

-OK, no argument here.

Ben landed a quick kick to the big man's crotch. He could feel his testicles compress through his shoes. He crumpled and curled up and started whimpering.

Ben moved ten feet down the corridor and started in on *The Irish Washerwoman*.

More coin fell on his handkerchief. Ben pocketed all but a quarter and a nickel.

The trumpet player came up to him.

-Shit man, you fucked me up. I should sue your ass

-Easy bro. Take out your trumpet and play. It's your turn.

-I can't play man. You fucked me up good.

-I'm not the welfare office, good buddy. Take out that horn. We'll play a duet.

-Fuck you.

-Try playing. Name a tune.

The junky took out his trumpet and buzzed a few pedal tones.

-Sounds like you can play to me.

-I play *Send in The Clowns*. He started playing the tune in B-flat.

-I thought you said slow tunes don't make money.

-Fuck you.

-Tune's usually in E-flat, but I can go with it.

Ben started improvising an obbligato. About halfway through the tune there were a half dozen people standing around listening. The penny whistle added a certain pathos to the song.

-When they finished there were singles and a lot of quarters on Ben's handkerchief. He snatched them up. He counted the money. Nine dollars and thirty-five cents. He gave five bucks to the trumpet man.

-Play it again, trumpet man.

-No, we need another tune.

-Hey, there's a whole different crowd. It worked once. It will work again.

By nine o'clock Ben had twenty-five and change in his pocket and so did the junky.

-Gotta go my man. Thanks for letting me use your space.

-I think you cheated me.

-Don't think so, good buddy. Keep practicing.

Ben headed off towards the shuttle and Times Square. Breakfast in ten minutes.

Ben exited the shuttle and took the uptown local one stop to Fiftieth and Broadway. His message/mail service was in the Brill Building and he knew the coffee shop across Broadway had a good breakfast for ninety-five cents.

He walked into the restaurant. There was a big line at the take-out counter.

A Jewish guy in a *yamakah* was arguing with the take-out guy.

-Today, I don't want a bagel, I want a Danish.

-What's matter you? Your doctors tell you not to eat bagels anymore?

-Tony, it's just today. I feel like a strawberry Danish.

-Ben!

He looked around and there was Heather from his service.

-Heather! I'm back in town. I'll be up to see you soon.

-Give me three coffees, two light, one black, two everything bagels with a smear, and one sesame bagel with strawberry jam. Toast the works. Sorry, Ben, it's work time. I have lots of messages for you and packages also.

-See you soon; I'm going to grab a table. Just got in from Tokyo.

-A waitress came up and asked, you alone?

-Yes, I'd like a table, but I see they are all taken.

-Counter OK?

-Sure.

Ben sat between two suits at the counter. One had the entire *Times* folded down to eighth size and was racing through the crossword with a fat Mont Blanc fountain pen. The other was reading *The Daily News*.

-I'll take black coffee, a Munster omelet special with bacon and hash browns; and give me a short stack on the side. Thanks.

-You want a one or two pancake short stack?

-Two.

-You know that's thirty-five cents more.

-Just give it to me.

The counterman filled a coffee, turned and put it down in front of Ben. With his other hand he deftly laid out knife, fork and spoon. Paper napkins were in a holder guarded by salt, pepper, catsup and a bottle of fake maple syrup.

-Murderous composer. Fourth letter is a u. The crossword man said to himself.

-Gesualdo

-Perfect. Thank you.

-I know he murdered his wife and her lover caught *in flagrante delicto*. Drove a sword through the both them when they were the beast with two backs, as it is said.

-Thanks. I have two minutes to finish this.

The counterman set down his breakfast.

-Here's the syrup. Need a refill on the coffee?

-Yeah, thanks.

-Man, I haven't eaten an American breakfast in three months. This looks great.

Ben glanced at the headline on the front page of *The Daily News*:

***SRO Rampage***  
***One Dead, 2 Hurt.***  
***Suspects Missing.***

To be continued.

