

Five Million Yen: Chapter 70

by Daniel Harris

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Ben left the airport and headed toward downtown Nice, his stomach was in a knot. He found a parking place near Gare de Nice and stopped in a tobac for the French daily newspapers. He took a table inside a café near his car.

—Bonjour, monsieur, said the waiter.

—Bonjour. Give me an espresso, double shot, and a pastis, said Ben.

—Ice?

—No ice.

—Bien sûr, monsieur.

The front page of *Nice-Matin* was filled with stories about the three murders in Nice, including photos of Serge "Bebe" Babikov, Isabella and Ida. Ben didn't have the pith to wade through the French sensationalistic journalism. He looked in the Arts section. There was a review of Saturday night's Monte Carlo Orchestra performance by their music reviewer, Hugo Crabe. Hausenstockmann received raves for *Constellations*. Nobokolov was pronounced a virtuoso of the contrabass who translated Hausenstockmann's highly mathematical composing style into a universal music that spoke to the people. Ben's playing was described as *the cold exact rendering one would expect from a New York studio musician. Regrettably our own reed virtuoso, Arno Donax (the other dedicatee of Constellations), was seriously injured*

in a motorcycle accident. One can only imagine the musicianship and warmth he would have brought to the part. The drunk Nobokolov probably gave that line to Hugo Crabe on Saturday night, thought Ben.

—Too bad the local boy wasn't able to add his warmth and musicianship to the part, my ass, said Ben half out loud. Donax couldn't even begin to play the notes Hausenstockmann wrote.

The waiter set the espresso, a small carafe of water and the pastis on Ben's table. He put the note on a saucer. Ben glanced at the note and put two 10-franc coins on the saucer. The waiter took the coins and tore the note half way across. Ben poured the water slowly into the pastis until he achieved a perfect white color. Ben raised the glass and took a tiny sip. He didn't need to get loaded, just needed to decompress. Pastis would relax his stomach and calm his nerves.

He still had *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération* to get through. He hoped one of those papers had a sensible review. Ben had had Mondays like this where nothing went as planned. He hoped things were not going to continue in this vein. It did not bode well for the difficult recording session he had in six hours.

Ben checked his watch and saw it was nearly noon. There was a telephone cabine on the corner.

—Garçon, I need to make a telephone call. I shall return in a minute.

—Oui, monsieur.

Ben slipped across the sidewalk to the phone cabine and dialed Lena Koshka's number.

—Allo. Bonjour.

—Hello, Lena. This is Ben Clarone. Is Anatoly Gringovitch there?

—Hello, Ben. He left for lunch with Arno Aghajanian and Zoë Bontemps not five minutes ago.

—Did Anatoly sell the Gorky?

—Oh, yes. Arno is leaving for Paris with it this afternoon. I believe you are owed some money.

—Yes, I was to meet Anatoly for lunch. He would pay me at that time.

—Gringovitch left instructions for me to pay you. Can we meet for lunch in an hour?

—That would be good for me, said Ben.

—Come to my office at Villa Arson. We will see what the weather is. That will determine where we dine.

—I will meet you at one in your office, said Ben.

—Perfect. A bientôt.

— A bientôt.

Ben returned to his table. He downed his cold coffee, Greek style, in a single gulp. He took a big sip of his pastis and opened *Libération*. Page three was devoted to the murders in Nice. Apparently “Bebe” was a known sadistic KGB assassin. There were photos and career descriptions of Isabella Sanitizzare and Ida Oates. Arris was in custody in Monte Carlo. He was being held on charges of murder, contract murder and attempted murder. Ben skipped to the Arts section.

There was a full-page review of *Constellations*. The reviewer, Felix Pequante, spent the first third of the review putting *Constellations* and Hausenstockmann in historical perspective. He mentioned that he attended both performances. He wrote: *If I had only heard Saturday night's premiere, I would think that Constellations was a duel between two contrabass instruments. Following the score with Maestro Hausenstockmann on Sunday, I discovered and heard that it was a much more subtle, pleasing and clever score. In fact, Monsieur Nobokolov was not up to his standards at the premiere, but on Sunday he and Ben Clarone were spot on with the score. The result had many frisson moments and jaw-dropping examples of virtuosity, rarely heard even on virtuoso instruments like the violin or the piano. The audience was attuned to the soloists' performance and gave them ten full curtain calls. All in all, Sunday afternoon's performance will be remembered as a defining moment in contemporary music.*

Ben gingerly ripped the page from the paper and put the review in his pocket.

A young man in his twenties and a mousy-looking girl about the same age, with backpacks and ponchos, approached Ben's table.

—Ben Clarone? said the man, his umbrella dripping water on Ben's copy of *Nice-Matin*.

—Yes, said Ben

—My name is Bill Solare, I play the bass clarinet. This is my girlfriend Molly Goldenrod. We heard your performance yesterday afternoon in Monte Carlo. We thought we would tell you how much we enjoyed your playing. It was a very powerful concert.

—Thank you, said Ben. Yes, I think *Constellations* is going to be a major musical composition of the late 20th century, maybe *the* major musical composition *of* the 20th century.

—That instrument you played is awesome!. What a sound it makes, said Molly.

—Yes, said Ben with a guffaw, it's not for the faint of heart.

—Would you autograph our programs? asked Molly.

—Of course, said Ben. Do you have a pen?

He signed both programs and handed them back to Molly, who put them in her pack.

—Are you Americans? asked Ben.

—Yes, we're from Los Angeles, said Bill. Molly is a big fan of your wife, Zoë Bontemps. Molly is vice-president of the *I'd Rather Not* fan club, Los Angeles chapter.

—You know Zoë is staying at the Negresco, said Ben.

—I know, said Molly. I tried to get her autograph, but security wouldn't allow it. Hey, are you divorcing Zoë for that Dutch stewardess?

—I think Zoë is divorcing *me*, said Ben, but not because of another woman.

—Molly, be polite, said Bill. Thank you Mr. Clarone. We enjoyed your playing. Let's go Molly.

—Thank you, said Ben. He watched Bill thread his way between tables with Molly holding his sleeve.

It was time to leave for Villa Arson. Ben hurried through the rain to his car. He had to park two blocks from the entrance of Villa Arson. He remembered there was an umbrella in the trunk. He took it and walked to Villa Arson. The gate was open. He didn't recognize the students working in reception.

—I'm here to see Lena Koshka, said Ben.

—Do you know where her office is? asked the receptionist, an anorexic girl with horned-rim glasses.

—I think so. It is in the museum.

—Yes. When you arrive at the museum, look for one of the guards, they will direct you.

—Thank you.

Lena Koshka was dressed in a suit. She had put the jacket over the back of a chair. Her high-necked ruffled blouse tastefully disguised her ample bust. Her hair was in a tight French roll. She stood to shake Ben's hand.

—Welcome to my humble office, she said giving Ben a firm handshake and a professional smile.

—Thank you, said Ben. Your office is a virtual warehouse of modern art. I see paintings by Gringovitch, Kline, Nauman, Beuys and a dozen I don't know.

—Not all of the paintings are purchased. Some are on loan for an upcoming exhibit. We're not that wealthy ... yet, she said, pausing before "yet."

—Well, it is impressive, said Ben. Did the museum buy any Gringovitch paintings?

—*The Black and The Red* is purchased. If I can raise the funds, we'll purchase two others. Anatoly is adamant about the price. He wants 500,000FF per, or about \$100,000 a painting.

—I'd have to play a lot of notes to make that kind of money, said Ben.

He quickly calculated that his 25% commission would be \$75,000 on the sale of three Gringovitch paintings. He was betting that Lena would raise the necessary funds.

—What's the weather like outside? asked Lena.

—Light showers when I walked from my car.

—There's a modest neighborhood restaurant, *Trois Frères Café*, not two blocks from here that has a good menu with a superb wine cellar, said Lena.

—Sounds like my kind of place, said Ben. Do we want to make the financial transactions now or after lunch?

—If you want American dollars, we'll go to the bank after lunch.

—Let's dine now.

The meal was excellent. Ben had a trout with wild mushrooms and some sautéed root vegetables. Lena had a chicken breast, with wild mushrooms and sautéed broccoli rabe. They split an excellent bottle of a fine white Côte du Rhone. She must have been a regular in the restaurant because the owners, the three brothers, doted on them, offering a complimentary *tarte de pommes* for dessert.

Ben couldn't tell if Lena was flirting with him, or was just one of those women who was a natural flirt. Lena's repartée and facial expressions certainly implied possible intimacy. She must have bumped his knee with hers twenty times during the meal.

—You know my husband, Marcello Metronomini, is scheduled to conduct *Constellations* with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam in May 1978. They also programmed it for the orchestra's fall 1978 American tour. Marcello wants you and Nobokolov to be the soloists again. Marcello is resident guest conductor and will be conducting the American tour.

—That would be a musical treat. I've never worked with Metronomini, but everything I've heard about his conducting is excellent.

—Should I tell him you are available?

—I'll make myself available, said Ben. I'd love another chance to play *Constellations*.

—Good, because Hausenstockmann has requested you and Nobokolov.

—Yesterday's performance was almost perfect, said Ben and the Concertgebouw is a vastly superior orchestra. Man, this is exciting news.

—I'll tell Marcello. His people and the Concertgebouw management will be in contact with you before the end of the year. The fee will be considerably more than you were paid in Monte Carlo and you won't have to play *Bolero*.

—I enjoyed playing *Bolero*, said Ben, like getting hot and sweaty with your high school sweetie in the back of your dad's Chevy.

—Shall we do some banking? said Lena giving Ben a wry smile.

—Lead the way, I'll drive.

Like everything else that day, there were problems at the bank. Lena presented Ben with Gringovitch's tally of loans and advances. His commission was 10% of the selling price of the Gorky. It sold for 1,200,00FF, not dollars. His commission was 120,000FF or about \$24,000. After deductions for advances, his total came to a little more than \$20,000. He would have to wait until Wednesday to receive his money in dollars. He spent three grueling months on the road and received five million yen, which he hadn't yet collected. That was worth only about \$16,000. Not chump change, but nothing like the art commissions Gringovitch was sending his way.

—Ben you can hardly travel with \$20,000 in cash, said Lena. If you lose it, it's gone forever. By Wednesday, I may be able to pay your commission on Gringovitch's *The Black and The Red*. That will be \$25,000. Can't you have it wired to your bank?

—I don't have a bank account. Can you wire it to my service in New York? he said, addressing Monsieur LeParque, the bank officer.

—Do you have a telephone number for them? said LeParque.

—I can call them now. It's nine o'clock in New York. They are probably just opening for the day.

Ben called his service.

—Musicians' Service. Ben Clarone's line, said Hilary.

—Hilary, this is Ben. I'm at my bank in Nice, France. I need to talk to Heather.

—How is France? said Hilary in her usual upbeat joyous voice.

—Tense, said Ben.

—I'll connect you immediately, said Hilary now in her professional voice.

There were a series of clicks on the line.

—This is Heather.

—Heather this is Ben. Question, can I wire you money from France? As you know, my personal bank account is closed. I need to move significant cash to New York.

—Yes, Ben, you may remember we set up an account for you at Manny Hanny.

—If I put the bank officer on the phone, can you give him all the numbers?

—Absolutely, Ben, but am I going to be the beneficiary of a little piece of this pile of money, like dinner and a show?

—I promise. Here is Monsieur LeParque. He speaks better English than I do.

Heather had LeParque falling all over himself to assist her. She must have been slathering on the charm.

—You are all set, Mr. Clarone, said LeParque. When you decide how much money you wish to wire transfer, I will see that it is sent the same day.

—That was painless, said Lena.

—Will that work for future deposits into my account here? said Ben.

—Yes, absolutely. If you have future earnings anywhere in Europe, you can have them deposited directly into your account at Crédit Agricole. Have Manufacturer's Hanover Trust request a wire transfer and it will appear in your account within three business days.

Lena and Ben left the bank. The rain had stopped, but a heavy overcast and early setting sun lent a gloom to the air.

—May I drop you off at Villa Arson? said Ben.

—Could you do better than that? asked Lena.

—Sure, said Ben consulting his watch.

—I damaged my car this morning, said Lena, and it will be in the shop until tomorrow. Can you take me to my office, and then take me home to Monte Carlo?

—Only if I can stop at my hotel for 10 minutes. I would like to shower and grab a box of reeds. The recording session starts at six. I must be there by 5:30.

—If you stop for me, said Lena. I can stop for you. You're driving.

* * *

The recording session did not start well. There were too many golden ears at the mixing desk. Hausenstockmann insisted on final say. He brought his own German recording engineer. The two French engineers, Luc Martino and Michel Candolfi were specialists in recording spatial music like *Constellations*. Unfortunately, there was the German-French conflict. By the dinner break at 8:30, not one section had been recorded. After the dinner break, there might be time for two complete takes, if there were no problems.

—Ben, can you talk to those guys? asked Serge Nobokolov. We will never get this recorded. They are going to lose the musicians' concentration if this goes on much longer.

—You're Marcevicz's friend. Why don't *you* talk to him? said Ben.

—Okay, at the break. We need this work recorded. Do you realize how many gigs we can get out of this? said Nobokolov.

—A nice thought, but I stopped counting eggs and chickens a long time ago with these things, said Ben. He wondered how starved for gigs Serge was. It would be nice to get some big soloist fees, but he had his band, *Pieces of Eight*, booked from June through August at jazz festivals all over the world.

Dinner was a sit-down affair in the same room where the gala was held. The musicians were gossipy and frustrated with the recording session. There was not a good vibe in the room. Ben decided to take his meal in his dressing room. He told people he needed time to work on reeds.

He was about to put fork to food, when there was a knock on the door.

—Oui?

Lena Koshka opened the door a crack.

—Ben, do you mind if I join you?

—No, not at all. I was trying to escape the carping musicians.
What are you doing here?

—I thought I would listen to the last half of the session. I heard it was not going well.

—You heard correctly, said Ben. He noticed that Lena was standing exactly where Monique had stood when Arris tried to assassinate him. He had a terrifying flashback.

Shaking his head to erase the image, Ben jumped up and took a chair, putting it next to him at the dressing table.

—Sit here, he said. Care for a taste of my dinner?

—Oh no, said Lena. I was going to invite you to my home for a late night plate of hot hors d'oeuvres and some very fine wine.

—You know I have a bad reputation with women, said Ben giving her a wink. Your husband might not like knowing I was a late night visitor.

—So, I've heard, she said, her eyes glistening. But I have a very open marriage: a don't ask, don't tell relationship.

—I had that for a while, said Ben. Now Zoë wants half a million in alimony.

—She'll never get it. She has no children and she's a millionaire. I know a lawyer in New York who can help you.

—Let's hope so. I don't play gigs for a hundred grand.

—So will you come to my home? I will need a ride.

—For you, the ride is the beginning.

* * *

The first take after the break was ragged, as was typical. The musicians needed to get back into the music. Most orchestral musicians have not trained themselves for the special skills and sonic memory required for recording sessions. After the first full take, Marcevicz went over a few spots with the orchestra.

The second take was nearly perfect. Hausenstockmann clapped and called out *bravo, bravo* many times.

—At least the Kraut is happy, said Nobokolov to Ben.

—That's a good sign, said Ben. I hope they captured the beautiful sound of your bass.

—It doesn't have any pedigree, said Nobokolov, but it has excellent tone and projection.

The orchestra and soloists were dismissed. Ben met Lena at the stage door.

—Need a *lift*? said Ben to Lena.

—Why thank you. In fact, I do need a *lift*, said Lena, acknowledging Ben's double entendre.

Ben woke to the smell of coffee and the sound of a shower. The sun was brilliant though low in the sky.

—He put on his slacks and looked into the bathroom. Lena was showering.

—Take off those pants and get in this shower, she said playfully. You need cleaning. You smell like you were out whoring all night.

Lena was an interesting character. Ben wondered how many notches she put on her bedpost in a year.

—I heard you like big breakfasts, said Lena, taking eggs, prosciutto, Camembert, and crêpe dough from the refrigerator.

—Who told you that?

—Your friend Monique, said Lena.

—When?

—Saturday night, said Lena. We had some girl talk. She told me she was going to dump you because of the terrible things that had happened to her. She said her relationship with you had caused all those problems. But, she couldn't stop talking about how wonderful you were. Did she “Dear John” you?

—On the drive to the airport yesterday morning.

—She'll be back. She told me you were a great lover. I thought I would find out for myself. A night of good loving helps one forget former lovers and errant husbands.

—One of the more pleasurable nights, I might say, said Ben thinking of Lena's skills as a lover.

—Be patient with Monique, said Lena, setting a pair of crepes before Ben. She'll come around. You'll see.

—Not until my divorce from Zoë is final, said Ben, and the paparazzi leave us alone.

—I'm not usually wrong about these things. But, if she won't take you back, you have my number.

To be continued

