

Five Million Yen: Chapter 71

by Daniel Harris

Click on my name above. It will take you to my home page where you will find links to more stories and other chapters of "Five Million Yen".

* * *

Ben took the *Corniche Inférieure* (the route along the sea) from Monte Carlo to Nice. He was driving Lena Koshka to her office at Villa Arson. It was that awkward time when one didn't know if the night's lover wanted to see you again.

—Ben, said Lena regarding a cruise ship heading to Monte Carlo, what is your schedule for the rest of your stay?

—Well, today I'm pretty loose. Tonight, I must attend a dinner thrown by the Monte Carlo Orchestra board honoring Hausenstockmann. Wednesday it's banking and then I fly to Paris. Thursday I return the contrabass to Selmer, unless I arrive in Paris early enough on Wednesday. I must exchange their contrabass clarinet for mine, which they are repairing.

—Why weren't you playing your *own* instrument? asked Lena.

—Some crazy violinist in the orchestra threw my instrument out the window of the apartment when I was staying on rue de Paris. It was wrecked, but some local artisans made it playable. When Selmer Corporation heard about my problem, the president of the company traveled to Monte Carlo and exchanged my instrument for a new one. It was only a loan, but a good PR decision by Selmer. My contrabass has many customizations and is one-of-a-kind, that is why I want it repaired and returned.

—That's news. Why didn't the papers pick that up? said Lena.

—Who knows? As they said in the review, I'm the cold, calculating New York studio guy. I was happy to have an instrument

I could trust for the premiere. Those quick repairs to the keys of my instrument could have failed at any time.

They drove in silence for a while. Suddenly Lena raised her arm pointing to an ancient olive tree on a point jutting into the sea:

—Ben, see that tortured olive tree on the left? It is my favorite tree in all France, said Lena. People say it predates Julius Caesar. Both Monet and Matisse painted it.

—I can see why. It looks mythical, said Ben.

Lena turned in her seat and faced Ben.

—When will you leave Paris?

—I'm going to try to leave Thursday, Friday at the latest. The problem is my ticket is round trip from Nice. If I can't exchange it for a return from Paris, I'll have to fly to Nice and then fly to New York.

—You know you can stay with me Thursday night if you need a place to stay.

—That would be terrific, but I hope to return to New York from Paris. I don't want to bump into Monique on the flight to New York from Nice. Nothing like ten hours of awkwardness.

—Are you saying that for my sake? said Lena, searching for Ben's motives.

Ben didn't answer.

—Well? said Lena.

—No, for *my* sake, said Ben. Look, I have been on the road since mid-July. I lost my home, my identities, my wife, my cat, most of my musical instruments, all my music, my clothes...the whole *megillah*. I don't have a bed to call my own. Three weeks ago, I was homeless in New York with less than a dollar to my name. I was a suspect in a murder case. I had to play a penny whistle in the subway for chump change. I had hit bottom. Arno Donax's accident was unfortunate for him, but a lucky break for me. Gringovitch helped me by paying me to take two paintings to Nice. Luck is when preparation meets opportunity. Gringovitch and Hausenstockmann gave me opportunities and I was prepared to take advantage of them. So far, you've been the kindest person to me in weeks. What can I say Lena.

You are a married woman and your husband will be conducting me in a year and a half. Whew! You talk about awkward.

—That's a long way off, said Lena, realizing the futility of her words as they left her mouth.

—A conductor can make a musician's life miserable, said Ben. Marcello will have every opportunity to berate and belittle me in front of the orchestra and the press. If he discovers I'm your lover he could be merciless. If he chose to, he could ruin my career. A tryst or two is one thing, but a lover is a motive for revenge.

Lena knew Ben was correct. She herself was using Ben to wreak her revenge on Marcello for his affair with that *zaftig* soprano. Her hopes for Ben as a lover she might enjoy once a month, or so, were waning. Ben obviously was experienced in these matters. She also knew Marcello's temper. Marcello would exact total and painful revenge on both of them.

—Well...did you say murder? said Lena changing the subject.

—Yes, I was staying in an SRO on the upper west side. Some crazy drug dealers beat to death a saxophonist I befriended in the flop with a naked lady, said Ben smiling to himself.

—Wait, a naked lady?

—It is the name given to some old models of Conn saxophones, said Ben.

—That's a relief. I thought you were involved with some serious Kraft-Ebig perverts, said Lena giving Ben a “you've got to be kidding me look.” That was good; you had me for a minute. Continue with the saga, mister comedian.

—Well, the murderers knew I had five million yen and stole all my belongings. They thought David Seltzer, the man who was murdered, knew where I kept my money.

—Did you actually have five million yen?

—Not exactly. I had a check for five million yen. But I had no bank account. The only account I had was a joint account with Zoë, which she had cleaned out. I was not about to use that account. She would have emptied it in a New York minute.

—But she's worth over a million! Why would she do that?

Ben had to think about his answer. He didn't want to sound like he was whining.

—Look, I don't know. She doesn't like me anymore. I was a bad husband, totally absorbed in my music and my career. She wants to hurt me, that's all I know. She's suing me for half a million dollars.

—Hard to believe, said Lena.

—You have to understand: When Zoë and I met, I was a struggling musician and she was a struggling actress. I soon became very successful. She continued to have problems winning auditions. She began to resent my success and was frustrated by her lack of success, and of course, the income inequities were astounding. I was making well over six figures a year and she could barely make six thousand a year, most of which was from Kinko's, not from acting jobs. We drew apart. Eventually she fell into the louche life of the unsuccessful actress. She was busted several times for drugs. She would sometimes disappear for days. While I was on this last tour, the off-off-off Broadway play she co-wrote and starred in, *I'd Rather Not*, was picked up by NBC and made into a television series. Zoë instantly became a star. That's not to say I was an angel. I succumbed to many temptations. I even bedded some of her closest friends trying to hurt her. So, now it's a divorce war.

—Your story has a familiar ring, said Lena, only *I* was the one with the income and *Marcello* was struggling. Now of course, his performance fees for one week are what I make in a year.

—Christ, look at us: Two adulterers with similar backgrounds enjoying a symbiotic relationship, said Ben with a laugh.

—If adultery can be symbiotic, said Lena, I'll take more.

Ben didn't answer. His emotional life was already too confusing. He pulled up to the gate of Villa Arson.

—Will I see you again? asked Lena.

—Depends on how things work out. Yes, I would like to see you again, but I'm dancing to every one else's tune for the next few days.

—Will you call me?

—Absolutely, said Ben pulling her to him. Their kiss was a long lingering one, more tenderness than passion.

—Call me if you need a place for tonight. Otherwise, call me tomorrow morning and I will let you know if your commission is deposited.

—Thank you Lena. I am touched by your kindness and concern. I will call you after the dinner tonight.

Lena left Ben's car and walked in the gate without turning around. She had the sinking feeling she had her last kiss from Mr. Ben Clarone of New York City. Her feelings were conflicted. She could tell Ben's were, too.

* * *

Ben decided to drive to Antibes and visit Madame Marcella Ghys, the owner of Roseau du Var. They supplied the finest reed cane to the woodwind players of the world. It took several tries to find Avenue Jules Grec on the outskirts of Antibes. Ben drove past the facility twice before he realized that the weathered barn in a muddy fenced field was the home of Roseau du Var.

Later when he thought about it, reed cane was an agricultural product. Local farmers who had a few unused acres leased the land to the Ghys to grow the variety of cane needed by woodwind players for their reeds. Roseau du Var was a small but profitable business. The Ghys cut the cane into tubes and reed blanks which they sold to the premiere manufacturers. Additionally they had a large mail-order business with the woodwind players who made their own reeds.

Ben parked in the yard between the barn and the house. No one was visible. A large collie dog came running up to him barking and wagging his tail. Ben stopped and greeted the dog. He walked into the barn with the dog following him. Madame Ghys was sitting at an ancient desk near a side door.

—Madame Ghys? said Ben, petting the dog's head.

—*Oui*, she said.

—I am Ben Clarone. I am a customer of yours. I live in New York City and purchase saxophone and clarinet reed blanks from you.

—Ah, Monsieur Clarone, she said. Let us speak in English. I need the practice.

Roseau, come here. The dog obediently came and sat at her feet.

Madame Ghys was probably late sixties. She wore a print dress, heels with wool stockings and a leather apron. Her graying hair was piled on her head, held in place by antique tortoise-shell combs. Many strands had escaped and fallen down, giving her a slight wild-woman appearance. Her skin had the healthy look of a person who lives outdoors.

—You were a soloist with the Monte Carlo Orchestra this weekend, yes? she said.

—Yes, I was. We recorded the Hausenstockmann *Constellations* last night.

—I read the review in *Nice-Matin* and also *Libération*. You are a famous virtuoso.

—Why thank you, said Ben slightly uncomfortable with praise from someone who didn't attend the concert.

—Here comes my husband, Attilio, said Madame Ghys. An elderly man sat on a small tractor pulling a high-wheeled groaning cart that looked as if it belonged in the time of Louis XIV. Stalks of reed cane were piled high on the cart. The load just cleared the entrance to the barn.

—With all the mud after the rain, pulling this cart is hard work for this little tractor, said Attilio.

—Hello, I'm Ben Clarone, said Ben.

—Yes, yes, the virtuoso, said Attilio. I recognize you from the advertisements for the concert this weekend. Pleased to meet you.

—Likewise, said Ben offering his hand.

—What brings you to Roseau du Var? said Attilio sitting on a chair.

—I need to purchase contrabass clarinet reed blanks, said Ben.

—Monsieur Clarone, can you read Russian, asked Madame Ghys standing and walking with a letter to where Ben was standing. The dog followed her.

—A little, said Ben.

—Can you confirm for me what this letter says? asked Madame Ghys giving Ben the hand written letter. Ben studied the letter. The handwriting fortunately was excellent.

—I think it says the writer wants 200 short cut (German style) oboe reed blanks, said Ben.

—That's what I thought, said Madame Ghys.

—You said contrabassoon reed blanks, asked Attilio.

—No, *contrabass clarinet* reed blanks, said Ben.

—Those are the nearly the biggest reed blanks we make. We may have shipped all our big stock to one of the commercial manufacturers.

—Attilio, I know we have a bag of big tubes. You can cut the blanks for Monsieur Clarone after we have lunch.

—I don't wish to disturb you. I came here hoping you had some blanks in stock, but if not, don't make a special effort for me. I wanted to purchase fifty blanks, if you had them.

—It is no trouble, said Madame Ghys. Attilio can cut them for you.

—This cane is exceptional, said Attilio dragging a burlap bag from a back room. It is from a few years ago. You can start using it immediately. I will cut a hundred blanks for you.

—That is more than generous, said Ben.

Ben left Roseau du Var late in the afternoon. He shared a lunch of potato leek soup, *pain de Compagne*, and a good local wine. He assisted Attilio cutting the tubes and blanks for his contrabass clarinet. As a reward, he left with 100 contrabass clarinet reed blanks, 100 bass clarinet and 200 soprano clarinet reed blanks. They would not accept any payment.

* * *

Ben drove to Hôtel Select in Beaulieu-sur-Mer. Fortunately he did not see Carmen when he arrived. He went to his room and took a shower. On a whim, he telephoned Lena.

—Allo *oui*, said Lena.

—Lena, this is Ben.
—Oh, I'm so pleased you telephoned. The shop still has my car.
Could you drive me home?
—Sure. I'm at my hotel, but I can fetch you and take you to Monte Carlo. You don't mind if your driver is wearing a tuxedo do you?
—I actually prefer that my drivers dress formally, said Lena laughing.
—One hour OK? said Ben.
—Perfect. See you then. I'll be at the gate.

Ben told the receptionist that if he didn't return by midnight, he would not be at the hotel until morning. He was about to leave when Carmen entered the lobby.

—Ben, you didn't stay in your room last night, said Carmen.
—No, said Ben. I went out with the boys and celebrated after the recording session. I was a little drunk and didn't trust driving back here, so I stayed at one of the musician's apartments.
—You weren't drinking to drown your sorrows were you? said Carmen.
—Yes, I was. I've got the blues over Monique. She has quit my life.
—Don't be too sure. Get rid of your wife, and she will fly into your arms. Trust me, I know, said Carmen.
—One can hope, said Ben, one can hope.
—Stay out of trouble tonight and don't drink too much, said Carmen scolding him.
—By the way, said Ben, I'm leaving for Paris tomorrow. I'll need my bill in the morning.
—Check out time is noon. If you don't want to pay for an extra day, you must vacate your room by noon.
—Yes, mama, said Ben, acting like a chastised boy.

* * *

For Ben, the reception and dinner was an exercise in political maneuvering. Most of the orchestra board wanted Arno Donax, if he recovered in time, to play the next performances of *Constellations*.

The original commission gave Nobokolov and Donax sole rights to the first twelve performances. Because the commission was a joint venture between the Monte Carlo Orchestra and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, all ten performances with the Concertgebouw should go to Arno, not Ben. In fact the Concertgebouw had postponed the Dutch premiere from May 1977 to May 1978 in hopes that Arno would have recovered from his injuries and could perform with the Concertgebouw.

Hausenstockmann wanted Ben and Nobokolov to play *all* the performances. He had completely rewritten the contrabass clarinet part after hearing Ben perform for him the first time in Nice. Hausenstockmann had little faith that Arno Donax possessed the virtuosity to play the revised part. Now that *Constellations* was recorded, Arno would have to play the same part Ben played. Ben was hands-down the superior performer who brought élan and rigor to the solo part. Marcello Metronomini insisted on Nobokolov and Clarone, but of course Marcello was not in attendance.

Nobokolov sided with the orchestra board. He felt Ben Clarone had upstaged him at both performances. Nobokolov knew he could easily outshine Donax.

Ben saw that he was outnumbered tonight. He wasn't going to, but he thought he best call Lena and stay with her tonight. He would need her assistance to assure he won the contract as soloist for the Concertgebouw performances.

—Lena, this is Ben. I'm about to leave the restaurant.

—Hello, Ben, she said, I don't suppose you would like to visit me tonight.

—Well, yes, that's why I called. I'm going to need your help. The orchestra board wants Arno Donax to perform my part in *Constellations*. They claim the original commission specifies that Nobokolov and Donax have exclusive rights to the first twelve performances. Only Hausenstockmann and Marcello are in favor of me, and Marcello is not here.

—Poor Ben, said Lena. You're welcome to come visit, but don't expect the same hospitality as last night.

—Maybe I should skip the visit, said Ben. I'll go to my hotel and prepare for my departure. Should I call you tomorrow morning about the commission money?

—Please, said Lena.

—Okay, said Ben. Will I see you tomorrow?

—Probably not, I have meetings all morning, said Lena. But please call me.

—I will, Lena.

* * *

Ben was playing chess with Michel in the bar of Hôtel Select when Jean-Claude, the orchestra manager of the Monte Carlo Orchestra, walked into the bar.

—I was hoping I would find you here, said Jean-Claude.

—Ah, Jean-Claude, said Ben standing and embracing him. May I introduce Michel Fréchaut, the owner with his wife, Carmen, of this wonderful hotel.

—Jean-Claude is an old friend, said Michel.

—Michel, it looks like checkmate in three moves, said Jean-Claude. Sorry Ben.

—Jean-Claude is president of the local chess club and a superb player, said Michel.

—What brings you to this den of iniquity? said Ben.

—Money. *Ben's* money, said Jean-Claude.

—My ears always become sharper when I hear my name and money, said Ben.

—There is good news and bad news, said Jean-Claude. The bad news is that I won't have a recording check for you until next week. But, for the performances and unpaid *per diems*, I have a roll of cash, American cash.

—Music to my ears, said Ben.

—Which one of you is paying Ben's hotel bill? asked Michel.

—The orchestra, said Jean-Claude.
—Does that include the extra guest he had for three nights?
—You mean Monique? said Ben.
—Yes, Monique, said Michel. Carmen just adores her.
—You will have to settle that with Ben, said Jean-Claude. His contract is for a room, single occupancy.
—If Carman adores Monique so much, why are you charging me for her stay? said Ben.
—*Mais oui*, Monsieur Clarone, we are still French innkeepers, said Michel with a wink and a smile.
The three men looked at each other and shrugged.
—You can deposit the balance of the money you owe me into my Crédit Agricole account in Nice, said Ben. See Monsieur Le Parque, he is my account agent.

* * *

Ben parked his car around the corner from Crédit Agricole in Nice at the stroke of nine Wednesday morning. He stopped at a telephone cabine and called Lena Koshka's office.
—Lena Koshka's line, said a grating female voice.
—This is Ben Clarone calling for Lena Koshka, said Ben. With whom am I speaking?
—This is her assistant, Liesette. Madame Koshka is not in her office at the moment. She instructed me to tell you that the commission has been transferred to your account at Crédit Agricole.
—Will she be available later today?
—Regretfully, no, said Liesette. She must attend a meeting at Foundation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. She wishes you a bon voyage. *Click*.
—Thank you, said Ben to a dead line.

* * *

The Air France flight to Orly Ouest was half-full. Ben paid a child's fare to have a seat for the contrabass clarinet. The Gorky painting was behind the last row of seats. He could see it out of the corner of his eye.

When he arrived at Orly he called Selmer offices on rue de la Fontaine de Roi. They were open until four. He had a little more than an hour to cab to Selmer from Orly Ouest. The cab driver did not seem to understand Ben's urgency. Ben finally convinced the driver he would pay for the contrabass as a second passenger and give him double the luggage fee. They arrived at the Selmer offices at 3:45.

Georges Selmer, the president of the company, greeted Ben as Ben came through the door lugging the contrabass, the Gorky and his backpack.

—Ben, said Georges, we heard you were spectacular in the Hausenstockmann. The reviews in the Paris papers were outstanding. They mentioned the sound of your Selmer contrabass several times. We loved it.

—Thank you, Georges. It would not have been possible if you hadn't loaned me this replacement instrument.

—How could we not have been generous to you? You are an *artiste of artistes*.

—You are embarrassing me, said Ben. So, how's *my* favorite contrabass clarinet?

—There are some problems, but nothing we can't fix. It is not quite ready. Will you be able to pick it up next week?

—I was planning on leaving for New York tomorrow.

—Can you dine with me tonight? I have a proposition for you, which you will find interesting and worth your consideration.

—I need to find a hotel and clean up. I only have jeans or a tuxedo.

—Of course. There is a small clean hotel around the corner. Many of our artists stay there. I'll have my assistant book you a room. Meanwhile, come meet the people of Selmer. They are anxious to meet you.

* * *

By the time Ben returned to his hotel room, it was midnight. The dinner was excellent and the proposition was appealing. They wanted him to be a Selmer artist, which entailed being available for trade shows to give lecture-demonstrations, workshops, and other public relations work. It was a tempting offer, but his schedule was too full for the next two years to accept.

They were disappointed, but could understand his dilemma. Georges did agree to cover the costs of shipping his contrabass clarinet to Manny's Music in New York City. He promised it would arrive at Manny's by December first.

Ben went to the lobby where there was a public telephone cabine and called Lena.

—Allo, said Lena.

—This is Ben.

—Ah, Ben, I'm so happy you called. I was feeling bad, afraid you thought I was avoiding you.

—Well, I did get that impression, but when I saw how you took care of the commission money, my faith was restored.

—Where are you?

—I'm in Paris at a small hotel near Republique, said Ben. I returned Selmer's contrabass. They offered me a nice deal to endorse their instruments. Unfortunately, they haven't fixed my contrabass. They are shipping it to me next week.

—Next week, said Lena, I can see you in New York. I have a meeting at the Guggenheim Museum and then shopping and more shopping. I'll be there Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I believe Thursday is your Thanksgiving holiday. Friday, I travel to Boston to hear Marcello conduct the Boston Opera.

—Take down these numbers.

—Wait, I need a pen, said Lena. She put the phone down and it fell to the floor. Ben could hear Lena cursing as she looked for a pen.

—Sorry about the phone. How do I reach you?

Ben gave Lena two numbers.

—The first number is my telephone answering service, said Ben. I check in with them several times a day. This second number is Gringovitch's home in Brooklyn. I'll make sure the answering machine is on and working.

—Are you flying from Nice or Paris? asked Lena.

—Paris.

—Oh, I was hoping to make you a fine homemade meal and offer plenty of after dinner treats, said Lena with real disappointment in her voice.

—We can have Thanksgiving together, said Ben. It's my favorite American holiday.

—That's exciting, said Lena.

—Yes, but, said Ben, I have to go; my card has less than a minute left.

—I'm missing you, Ben.

—A big kiss. Thanks for everything.

The phone card expired and the line went dead.

Monsieur Clarone, asked the desk clerk, do you need a wake-up call tomorrow morning?

—Yes, a 5:30 wake-up call and I will need a taxi to Charles De Gaulle airport at 6:00.

To be continued.

