

Five Million Yen: Chapter 72

by Daniel Harris

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Ben considered his options in the taxi to Charles De Gaulle airport. He had two choices: Exchange his Nice-New York ticket for a Paris-New York ticket and travel as Benjamin Adoyan; or buy a one-way Paris-New York ticket and travel as Ben Clarone. Which to do? His Nice ticket was with Pan Am; he would buy an Air France ticket if he bought a one-way fare. He knew inter-airline ticket exchanges were iffy. The moment to cast the die was imminent.

Ben walked up to the Air France ticket counter.

—May I help you? asked a charming older French woman.

—Yes, I would like to exchange this ticket for a one-way ticket to JFK.

—This ticket is with Pan American. Air France has no reciprocity with Pan American.

—May I purchase a one-way ticket from Paris to New York on Air France?

—But, of course, Mr. Adoyan, she said, looking at his ticket.

Ben's heart stopped. Now he couldn't travel as Ben Clarone. Why did he think he could deceive this woman?

—How much is the fare?

—For voyager class?

—Yes.

—It will be 2,100FF.

—That is almost \$400 dollars. Is there a less expensive way to go?

—If you purchased your ticket two weeks in advance it would have been 1,200FF. Maybe you should enjoy France for two more weeks, said the woman with a smile.

—How much to fly to Nice?

—600FF.

—I flew from Nice yesterday for much less.

—But that was to Orly. This is Roissy Charles de Gaulle, there are no direct flights to Nice.

—Can you see if there is room on a flight to Nice that will allow me to catch Pan Am flight 83 to JFK?

The woman typed on her terminal.

—I am sorry, Monsieur Adoyan, but there are no flights to Nice that will allow you to make a correspondence with Pam Am 83.

—When is the next Air France flight to JFK?

She typed for at least a minute into her terminal.

—You can leave in 90 minutes on our flight to Montreal. You will connect with Air Canada to JFK.

—Is there a direct flight?

—I am afraid all other flights are booked. Many French travel to New York for shopping this time of the year.

—Book me on the next flight to Montreal.

—Passport, please.

Ben was angry with himself. What a screw-up I am, he thought. Oh well, in eight hours I'll be Ben Clarone again. At least he had only the one picture and a backpack to carry.

In Montreal Ben never entered Canada, but waited in the transit lounge. When the Air Canada plane arrived at JFK he had to clear immigration and customs— the last challenge before he would return to his real identity.

—Welcome back to America, said the immigration official, barely looking at his passport when he stamped it. Follow the signs to Customs.

—Thank you, great to be back in New York, said Ben.
Since Ben had no checked luggage, he was one of the first from his flight into the customs hall.

—Anything to declare? asked a young customs agent.
—Only this painting, which I bought in Paris for 100-francs.
—Come with me, said the Customs officer, escorting Ben to a long counter off to the side. Unpack your backpack and unwrap the painting.
—Yes, sir.

The Customs agent took Ben's Adoyan passport, customs declaration, tickets, and walked away. Ben stood by the unwrapped painting and the contents of his backpack for a good thirty minutes until the inspector and another uniformed man arrived. The second man was much older. He was holding a copy of the *National Inquirer*. The cover of the *National Inquirer* featured a picture of Ben and Zoë at the gala in Monaco with Zoë's breasts falling out of her dress.

—Do you have a receipt for this painting? asked the original customs agent.
—No, said Ben, it was a cash transaction at one of the *Bouquiniste*, the green box vendors, along the Seine near Pont Neuf.
—Are you positive about the price? said the customs agent.
—Pretty sure.
—Do you know the painter of the original? asked the older man.
—The seller told me, but I forgot. I think he was Russian or Scandinavian.
—We think it is worth more than twenty dollars, said the older man. Didn't you pay 500 francs for this painting?
Ben thought they were trying to entrap him with that low-ball figure.
—Actually, I paid about \$200, a thousand francs, said Ben
—That's more like it, said the younger customs agent. He wrote on the duty declaration: Duty \$40, Fine \$25. You can pay this at the counter over there. Show the receipt to a Customs inspector when

you leave. Here's your passport. Welcome back to America. Never try to cheat U.S. Customs.

Ben looked at his watch. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. He took a cab to Gringovitch's house in Park Slope, Brooklyn, told the driver to wait. Then Ben had the driver drop him at the Brill Building at 1619 Broadway, 49th street entrance.

—Hilary, you get more beautiful every time I see you, said Ben greeting Hilary the receptionist at Musicians' Service.

—Oh, Ben! she said running around her desk to give him a big hug. You are such a flirt. Look at this. She pointed to the rock on her left hand ring finger.

—Wow! That's some rock? You must have some kind of magic to lasso a guy who can afford a chunk of ice that size.

—Ben, it's actually a zircon, but it's still terrific. Will you come to the wedding?

—Of course. Looks like I let another hot babe slip through my grasp.

—But Ben, you never asked me out.

Heather heard Ben's voice in the reception area and came out to greet him.

—Ah, the CEO and cunning vixen of Musicians' Service, said Ben giving Heather a big hug.

—Ben, you look totally exhausted, said Heather. Are you feeling okay?

—Better than in weeks, said Ben eyeing her perfect legs.

—If I'd know you were coming, I would have dressed for the occasion, said Heather.

—Not to worry. There will be many opportunities in the next few days.

—You have many messages, Ben and \$40,000 was transferred today into our joint Musicians' Service/Ben Clarone account. Do you have all your instruments? You are going to need them all.

—Not yet. Some are at Bright Star Recording Services and some at the Ninth Avenue Gold and Pawn. I thought I'd check in with you and then head up to the pawnshop. I'll need some cash to retrieve my instruments.

—It's too late today to get money from the bank. You're staying in Park Slope, Brooklyn, correct?

—Yes.

—The banker told me there is a Manufacturers Hanover Trust branch at Carroll Street and Seventh Avenue. You can open an individual account and transfer the funds from your joint account with us.

—I guess I'll have to wait to get my horns out of hock, said Ben. I'll go over to Bright Star and pick up my instruments there.

—I think you should just go home and sleep. You look terrible and you are booked solid until May, starting December first.

—I can't take you out to dinner?

—Today is my father's sixtieth birthday. I must leave now and prepare for the party in Staten Island. Some other time, perhaps.

—At least I asked, said Ben. Give me credit for that.

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Gringovitch's house was much too large for Ben, he felt uncomfortable sleeping in someone else's bed. The piano in the parlor was amazing, but it wasn't enough to warrant staying longer than necessary. Once he had his horns and money, Ben could make a serious search for an apartment. Today was Friday, November nineteenth. Next Thursday was Thanksgiving. December first was the following Wednesday. If he were lucky, he might be able to move the weekend after Thanksgiving. He only had a backpack and his instruments to move. But now, time to eat breakfast.

Ben left Gringovitch's house. Across the street was the burned out house. He thought he saw a shadow move across the crack in one of the plywood covered windows. Must be some poor homeless bastard living in that smelly pile, said Ben to himself.

—Hey Clarone, you're gonna pay, shouted a voice from the burned house. Big time!

Ben turned to look. It was Austerlitz, the pesky lawyer and gumshoe, yelling from the steps of the burned house. He was an unkempt wreck. A shell of his former self: unshaven, matted dirty hair, ragged clothes. Ben could detect his *shmek* from across the street.

As he approached Seventh Avenue, Ben saw Augie, the proprietor of Brooklyn Cigar Company, with his Nikon on a tripod taking his daily photographs of the intersection of Third Street and Seventh Avenue.

—Morning, Augie. Remember me, Gringovitch's friend, Ben Clarone?

—I remember you. I took your picture crossing Seventh Avenue about a month ago. So, how was Monte Carlo?

—More excitement than I wanted, but a profitable trip.

—Money is always good. Are you staying at Gringovitch's house?

—Yes, but I need to find a place of my own.

—Talk to Jackie at 35 PPW. He said there was a unit available.

—Is he there now?

—Yes, he's the live-in super.

—Thanks, I'll check it out.

Ben ate breakfast at the Greek place on Seventh Avenue and then walked to 35 PPW. The entrance was on Garfield Place.

—Are you Jackie? inquired Ben of the man hosing the sidewalk.

—Yes, may I help you.

—Augie at Brooklyn Cigar Company said there was an apartment available.

—There is one, but it comes furnished and this is a co-op, so you have to buy. There are no rentals.

—Do you know the price?

—I think \$35,000, but I'm not the agent.

—Who is the agent?

—Elegant Brooklyn on Seventh Avenue.

—Is the apartment ready for occupancy?
—Yes, the owner passed away last year. His children are selling the unit as is. There were two famous paintings in the unit, but the owner bequeathed them to the Brooklyn Museum.
—When was it last renovated?
—Two years ago, but the owner went into hospital about three months later.
—Sounds like a good deal.
—If you have \$35,000, said Jackie. That's very high for Park Slope. You could buy a brownstone for less than \$20,000, but this is a prime white-glove building. Prices will only rise. If nothing else, it is a good hedge against inflation.
—Oh, I can cover that. You said Elegant Brooklyn is the real estate agent?
—That's correct, Seventh Avenue at 10th Street. What is your name? If I see the agent, I'll give him your name.
—Ben Clarone. I'm a friend of Anatoly Gringovitch, if you know him.
—Oh, yes, his son Zeno was in my daughter's class at PS 371 a few years ago.
—I'm staying at his house on Third Street. How big is the unit?
—Three bedrooms, two and a half baths and two maids' rooms.
—Sounds perfect, said Ben.
—Good meeting you, Mr. Clarone. Maybe you will be an owner here soon.
—It would be convenient. Thank you for information, Jackie.

Ben walked to Carroll Street and Seventh Avenue and entered Manufacturers Hanover Trust bank. A half hour later, he had \$5,000 in his checking account, \$35,000 in savings, and a dozen blank checks. His wallet held \$1500. He told the bank officer he was expecting a wire transfer from Japan sometime the next week.

As he walked to Grand Army Plaza to catch a train to Times Square, he checked out the neighborhood. Like most of New York

City, it was suffering from neglect and the ravages of the drug epidemic. Basically, it was sound.

Ben wondered how the city fathers could let a great city fall to such a deplorable level. It had to be politics and money. He wondered if he should bet that Park Slope would rise from its current depression. He knew redlining was the basic cause for the decline of the urban areas. Another example of patrician white males singling out the poor and minorities by restricting loans and services. One had to hope that the recent Equal Opportunity laws would end redlining.

He stopped in Park Heights Stationers and purchased a date book and a dozen pens. The young woman behind the counter was beautiful and looked like an actress or model.

—I think I know you, she said.

—Really? said Ben.

—Aren't you Zoë Bontemps husband, Ben Clarone?

—You've found me out, said Ben. Yes, legally I'm her husband.

—Really? The picture of you two on the front page of the *National Inquirer* looked pretty cozy to me.

—A moment of truce, said Ben.

—Who was the other woman you were with? She is stunning, said the clerk.

—An old friend. She had the night free, so I invited her to attend my concert and the gala.

—Do you think you could introduce me to Zoë? I'm perfect for her television show. All I need is an audition.

—Zoë lives in L.A. I'm afraid I can't help you. Nice meeting you, but I'm late for an appointment. Good luck.

After the Paris metro, Ben couldn't believe how disgusting the New York subways had become. Not only were the stations filthy and decrepit, but the trains needed cleaning and repair. Instead of traveling at 35 miles an hour, the trains were creeping along, stopping and starting because the tracks and signals were in such

poor condition. Maybe Brooklyn was not a good choice for a musician who kept irregular hours. He would have to ask Gringovitch about the taxi and car service situation in Park Slope.

It was midnight in Tokyo when Ben called Hidenori Matusoka. Hidenori answered the telephone too cheerfully, as if he had been drinking.

—This is Ben Clarone.

—Ah, Ben, I've been waiting a month for your call.

—Hidenori, I apologize, but I left New York almost as soon as I returned. I'm back in New York and have bank account numbers for you.

—Ben, I thought you didn't want your five million yen. I was ready to spend it on another project.

—Really?

—Just kidding. We have the highest regard for you. I was worried that something happened. We read about your wife in the fan magazines, but nothing about you.

—I think that will change soon.

—I hope for the better.

—Not likely, said Ben.

—Back to business. Give me your bank numbers. I will have the bank wire your five million yen first thing Monday morning.

—What day is it in Tokyo?

—It's just after midnight, Saturday morning.

—Excellent. Can you cable my service when you have transferred the funds?

—Absolutely.

—I hope we can work together again soon, my friend.

—Maybe as early as June, said Hidenori. I would like to repeat the concerts from the tour here in Japan in cities other than Tokyo.

—Let me know soon, my schedule is filling up fast.

—You should know before the first of the year.

—Sounds good. Give my warmest regards to your charming wife.

—Ben, said Heather having overheard their conversation admonished Ben: You must be more formally polite with Hidenori, Ben. He's a very traditional Japanese gentleman.

—You are correct, Heather, but we became very close during the three months we were on tour together.

—I've spoken to him several times on the phone and I was very formal, you should be too. I don't care what you say.

—Okay, okay, next time. I'm off to the pawnshop to see if I can retrieve my horns. Do you think you can have Hilary copy my gigs and contacts into my date book?

—It will cost you.

—How much?

—Dinner.

—With you or Hilary?

—Ben! I could throw a shoe at you.

—I'm outta here.

To be continued

