Five Million Yen: Chapter 73

by Daniel Harris

Ninth Avenue Gold & Pawn was a gritty storefront between West 55th and 56th. The store windows and front door glass were covered with riot and theft steel window grids. The name of the store was written in flashing red neon over the main window. Three suspended gold balls, the traditional sign of a pawnshop, hung over the street at the entrance. Inside, there were glass cabinets containing pawned items that were for sale. The pawnbroker sat behind bulletproof glass at the rear of the display area, a veritable potentate of hope and cash, exchanging expendable items for derisory cash. Loud distorted salsa music from the apartments above the pawnshop unsuccessfully masked the traffic noise of Ninth Avenue.

When Ben entered, he saw what appeared to him as his alto, tenor and baritone saxophones in the display area. This meant that the pawn had expired and they were now for sale. He didn't see his flutes, or clarinets. If he had to purchase his own instruments, he could be in a world of hurt. How much could Zoë have received for his horns?

A wan scraggly haired woman was arguing with the pawnbroker about the value of a broken thin gold chain. The pawnbroker was not buying her story.

— You know it's stolen, that's why it's broken. Probably ripped right off the neck of the owner in the subway. You can sell it on the street. I could lose my license taking it.

— You're never fair, you bastard. Give me a break. You can see I have the junk joneses.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/daniel-harris/five-million-yen-chapter-73»*
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—You're problem is not my problem. I run an honest business here. You know the rules.

The woman turned, almost running into Ben, and bolted out of the shop.

—May I help you?

—Tough case, said Ben.

—She's in here a couple of times a day with stolen stuff. What do you have?

—I have tickets for three saxophones, two flutes, a piccolo, and three clarinets.

—These tickets are from August 16 to the order of Zoë Bontemps. They are over 90 days old. Those items are for sale.

—Zoë's my estranged wife. She hocked my instruments while I was on tour. What do I do? I need my horns to make my living.

—I hear that story everyday.

—Well, it's true. So, how do I get my instruments out of hock?

—Let me see how many I still have.

The pawnbroker locked the sliding drawer for exchanging money and small items and went into the back room. He returned with the flutes, piccolo and the clarinets. He then went behind the display cases and gathered the three saxophones.

—What about the cases for the saxophones?

—I have dozens of cases. How would I know yours?

—My name, Ben Clarone, is on the luggage tags. The baritone saxophone was in a Reunion Blues gig bag.

The pawnbroker went to the back room. He returned with the cases.

—You're going to have to buy these instruments.

—What? Can't I just pay off the tickets?

—The property is mine. It's for sale. The tickets are expired. Look, he said pointing to a posted notice; it's New York City law.

—So what'll it cost me?

—Let me add it up.

—Can I at least try the horns? I need to know if all my reeds, mouthpieces, neck straps and other items are still in the cases. Also, I need to know if they have been damaged.

The pawnbroker let Ben behind the bulletproof glass. Ben immediately started checking out his instruments and their cases. He assembled them and play tested them.

The pawnbroker sat at his desk adding up the total.

Powell silver flute/gold embouchure $1,200 loan=120
Haynes silver alto flute/gold embouchure $1,400 loan=140
Haynes wood piccolo $700 loan=$70
Buffet R-13 B-flat soprano clarinet $600 loan=60
Buffet R-13 A soprano clarinet $600 loan=60
Buffet E-flat soprano clarinet $350 loan=35
Selmer Mark VI Alto Saxophone $1250 loan=125
Selmer Mark VI Tenor Saxophone $1450 loan=145
Selmer Mark VI Baritone (low A) Saxophone $1800=180

Net price	$9,350
Tax @ 6%	561
Total	9,911

Loan:	935.00
Pawn Fee @20	180.00
Interest @2%/mo	57.23
Insurance @9.35/mo:	28.05
Total:	1,200.28

—Mr. Clarone, the total for all nine instruments is $9,911.00. That includes sales tax.

—Jesus, that's nearly retail.

—All those instruments are in perfect playing condition and show normal minor wear and tear.

—Hey, man. All you did was store them for three months.

—Not quite, Mr. Clarone. I loaned your wife $935. Since the total loan cost of $1,200.28, which includes interest and fees, was not paid by 90 days, the collateral is mine to sell.

—Come on, man! Can't I just pay the tickets? You're still making good coin.

—Look, mister, I'm doing you a favor. These prices are much less than you would pay if you bought new, even with your professional discount. Legally, you can't redeem those tickets. Only Zoë Bontemps is allowed by law to redeem the tickets.

—Damn, damn, damn, said Ben through clenched teeth punching his left palm with his right fist. Jesus, I'm screwed. That bitch Zoë really fucked me over.

Ben looked at the nine horns in their cases. It would take him weeks and probably close to 20 grand to replace all those horns. It could take years to replace the flutes, the demand was so high and the production rate so low. This bastard and that bitch wife have my jewels in a vice.

—How do I pay you?

—I dispense cash, said the pawnbroker. You buy with cash.

—What if I give you $1000 now to hold them and I'll return later this afternoon with the rest of the cash.

—I can do that for you. If you don't return by tomorrow afternoon, I'm free to sell them.

—How about an even $8,000?

—I'll forgive the tax, $9,350.

—$8,500.

—$9,350

—$8,750, not a dollar more. These horns are not cherry, they're used.

—OK, $9,000, but only if you pay me before six tonight.

—What then?

—$9,350.

—Godamn rip-off. You'll get your money.

Ben took out his wallet and gave the pawnbroker 10 Franklins.

—That's all I should have to pay. You're gouging me.

—Look, I have much cheaper instruments; you don't have to buy these instruments.

—Hey, buddy, I'm a pro's pro. I don't play student instruments. Besides, these instruments were stolen from me. This is outrageous.

—Did you report the theft to the police?

—No, said Ben sheepishly. I didn't know they were missing until I returned to New York.

—As they say at the welfare office, you're SOL.

—I'm more than shit-out-of-luck; I'm really pissed at being ripped off by you and my wife.

Ben left the pawnshop furious.

—God damnit, he yelled out loud. I could kill that bitch.

He flagged a cab and took it downtown to the closest Manufactures Hanover Trust branch. He withdrew $8000 from savings. Grabbed another cab to Ninth Avenue Gold and Pawn. There were two obvious junkies trying to pawn a fake Rolex watch.

—Excuse me. I have a cab waiting, he said to the pawnbroker. Can we take care of our business now?

—One moment, Mr. Clarone.

It was ten minutes before the pawnbroker finished with the junkies. Ben had to reassure the cabby that he really needed the cab and would be a few more minutes.

—Okay, Mr. Clarone. I apologize for not taking you immediately, but I didn't want those two to see this much cash changing hands. They're liable to return with a gun.

Ben paid up and loaded the nine horns in the cab.

—Brill building, 49th street entrance.

—Got it, 49th and Broadway. You some musician?

—Not just some musician, one of the best, said Ben, still seething over having to get his horns out of hock for an outrageous sum.

The cabby helped him carry his instruments up to Musicians' Service.

—Hilary, I brought some of my friends here for a few hours, said Ben to the receptionist.

—Not a problem Ben. Seems like we are always babysitting you guys' instruments.

—I'm going for a bite. Can I bring you anything?

—No, I'm brown bagging it. Got to save for the wedding. Heather is on a bank- and-lunch run.

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Ben went to the coffee shop across Broadway. He couldn't believe what he saw, Lieutenant Harold Smith sitting at the counter working the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. Ben took the stool next to him.

—Of all the diners and greasy spoons in the world…Hello Lieutenant Smith, said Ben taking the stool next to Smith.

—You walked into *this* one, said Smith finishing Ben's paraphrase of Rick's speech in *Casablanca*. Hello, Adoyan. Sold any Gorky pictures lately?

Ben's heart skipped a beat.

— I don't deal art, I'm a musician.

—That's correct, you're an occasional art courier, said Smith filling in the word courier on his crossword puzzle.

—Looks like you had some more operations on your face, said Ben.

—Worse than that, said Smith, tapping his pen on the newspaper.

—I'm sorry. I hope you will be better.

—Thanks, but there's almost no hope for the long term. Hmm…seven letter word: Tragedy ends in hop. Last letter is a k.

—What's the clue?

—Tragedy ends in hop.

—Alban Berg's opera, *Wozzeck*. Marie's son sits on a hobby horse at the end and says “hop, hop.”

—Z's or s's?

—Two z's, w-o-z-z-e-c-k.

—You're sure it's two z's, asked Smith, writing the word in the margin of the paper.

—Positive. The play is spelled w-o-y-z-e-c-k.

— I must have screwed up somewhere else. The play works.

There was a long silence as Smith studied his answers to the crossword puzzle.

—What'll you have? said the counterman to Ben.

—Turkey sub, toast the bread, mayo, provolone, lettuce and tomato, heavy on the black pepper, and a Guinness, said Ben. Can I buy you a slice of pie or another coffee, Lieutenant?

—No, thank you. You'll be pleased to know that we apprehended Leroy Burr, aka Big Stinger. He fingered Victor Ruiz as the murderer of David Seltzer. Burr is at Riker's awaiting trial on manslaughter charges for the death of Rita Olivera. Ruiz fell, or was pushed, off a window ledge in Boston and is a vegetable in Mass General.

Ben drained half his Guinness. He was still fuming that he essentially had to repurchase his horns. He knew he should have left his instruments with his repairman for safekeeping. Zoë had screwed him royally.

—Detective-Sergeant Mulvihill tells me the two of you may have to testify at Arris's trial in Monaco.

—That's news to me. No one has contacted me.

—Probably because the French police are waiting for Ben Clarone to leave France so they can stop and question him. You were either very clever or very stupid leaving the country as Benjamin Adoyan.

—Why would they want Ben Clarone?

—Because his friend Dan Arris says Ben Clarone is an accomplice in the plot that killed Olivia Krackenthorpe.

—You're pulling my chain, Lieutenant. I only met Olivia once and that was in the lobby of the Ritz in Paris. She was with her mother.

—I don't know. Your friend Lena Koshka may have saved your *tukhus*, said Smith. She claims she was with you when Olivia Krackenthorpe was murdered.

—Could be.

—You will probably be deposed. Worst case, you and Mulvihill will testify at Arris's trial. Arris's lawyers have to come up with some hard evidence to have a charge made against you.

—No one has contacted me.

—Not yet, Clarone, not yet.

Ben gave Smith a close look, drained his Guinness and asked for a refill.

—By the way, Clarone, you need to thank Detective Mulvihill for saving your life. He's waiting for me outside.

—Is this a trap?

—No, Ben, he actually almost likes you. Says you are an astounding musician. It would be good form to thank him for saving your life. Apparently you never did.

—Give me a break Lieutenant, I never saw him after the incident.

Smith stood, donned his trench coat, fedora, and put the folded *Times* under his arm.

—Thanks for the tip, Smith said, putting a hand on Ben's shoulder. Wozzeck, two z's. That can't be correct.

—I wouldn't lie to you, Lieutenant. Maybe they meant the play, but the play was never finished. I'll be right back, said Ben to the counterman who was placing his turkey sub on the counter.

Outside, a battered prowl car was parked on Broadway. Detective-Sergeant Mulvihill was at the wheel, drinking coffee from a paper cup. Mulvihill rolled down his window.

— Detective Mulvihill, I owe you big time, said Ben.

—Ben Clarone, you escaped France. I thought those frogs were going to lock you up and throw away the key. Four dead women and who knows how many pregnant ones. Impressive.

—Really? You're kidding, said Ben. All I did was play some concerts. I owe you a huge debt. I see your wrist is still taped.

—Yeah, Arris has hard bones. It was a close call for you and your friend Monique.

—How can I thank you?

—Officially you can't, but if you happen on some tickets to *A Chorus Line*, my wife would appreciate it.

—Top of my list, Mulvihill, and I'll throw in a dinner at Sardi's.

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Ben and Lena Koshka sat in the Rainbow Grill on the 65th floor of 30 Rockefeller Center. The low sun was turning the windows of Manhattan's skyscrapers a brilliant gold.

—Ben, such an amazing view, said Lena.

—Much classier than going to the Empire State Building, waiting in line for hours and then having a few minutes to stand in the cold and admire the view. Tomorrow, we will have Thanksgiving dinner at Windows On The World at the World Trade Center, 107 floors above the street. Try that in Paris.

—Ben, you are so good to me. Why? You know it's futile to be lovers.

—I think last night puts a lie to that, said Ben studying her face.

Lena reached across the table and took Ben's hand.

—You have such perfectly formed hands, said Lena.

—They are my profession, also my back up job.

—Back up job?

—If all else fails, I can be a male hand model, he said grinning. Are there such things?

—I know women who are hand models, but I don't know any men, said Lena.

—You're a smart, clever woman. Tell me: should I buy an apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn, or rent at the Ansonia on Broadway?

—Isn't the Ansonia the building with the sex club in the basement?

—Gay bathhouse. Bette Midler, a young singer I know, performs there. Her pianist is Barry Manilow; you might have heard his version of Bruce Johnson's *I Write The Songs*.

—Where do you know these people? asked Lena.

—I've performed on their records, demos, and for their gigs.

—You travel in so many musical worlds — pop, classical, avant-garde, and commercial work.

—Don't forget my jazz group, Pieces of Eight.

—You are amazing. My husband, Marcello, doesn't have that musical flexibility. For him, it's the symphony and opera. He plays the piano and the violin very well, but as he said, he's no Jascha Heifetz or Vladimir Horowitz..

—Well, neither am I, but I'm a respected woodwind player. I'm what the contractors' call a “first call” player, the guys you call when the job has no room for error. Those performers who can come in and sight-read a part perfectly in the correct style.

—That's a whole side of music I don't know.

—Well, you're an art curator and historian; I wouldn't expect you to know that stuff. I don't know most of today's painters and sculptors, but I'm sure you do.

—You run with me and you will, said Lena giving Ben a playful wink.

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Ben and Lena stood in front of the Waldorf. A doorman was loading Lena's luggage into a taxi.

—Ben, I had the most wonderful time in New York, said Lena embracing Ben. You were the perfect host. The Thanksgiving dinner at Windows On The World was heavenly.

—Yeah, we were pretty close to heaven at that height, said Ben.

—When will I see you again? asked Lena

—I'm booked solid from Wednesday until May, and my summer is filling up. I'm sure Pieces of Eight is playing at the Grand Parade du Jazz, so I'll be in Nice in July.

—That's a long way off.

—I might testify at the trial of Dan Arris in Monaco, in which case I will see you before July. But, aren't you coming to New York again soon?

—No. I have a big exhibition to assemble and mount, so I'll be working in Nice all spring. After Boston, Marcello will be in Europe conducting until next August. We spend August at his home in Switzerland

—I'll call you to let you know my new address and telephone. I have to find my own place this weekend. What was that divorce lawyer's name again?

—Reznik. Al Reznik. His office is on Maiden Lane in lower Manhattan. He'll break Arno Aghajanian into pieces. He's expensive, but in the end you'll save money.

—How can I repay you for all you've done for me? said Ben.

Ben pulled back a little from Lena and gave her a close look. He saw tears forming in both eyes. He pulled her close and kissed her tenderly.

—You're killing me, Ben. I'm going to miss you terribly.

—I'm going to miss you, too.

Ben guided Lena to her cab.

—Love you, mouthed Lena, blowing Ben a kiss as the taxi pulled away.

—Do you need a taxi, sir? asked the doorman.

—Yes, said Ben.

The doorman whistled for the next taxi in the queue.

—Where to sir?

—ASPCA on East 92nd street.

—You got it.

The ASPCA was both a happy and a sad place. Ben didn't know why he decided to go there. It was time to start building a new home. Maybe he should get a cat.

—May I help you? asked a cheery woman at reception.

—I'm here to inquire about my cat, said Ben.

—*Your* cat? she asked.

—About three months ago, my wife left our cat here to be euthanized. I have the receipt here

Ben gave the woman the receipt. She disappeared into a records room and returned with a folder.

—Good news, Mr. Bontemps. Tushka was never euthanized; she was adopted the same day she arrived. Sadly, she was returned this Monday. If she isn't claimed by Sunday, she will be euthanized.

—I'm Ben Clarone, not Mr. Bontemps. Zoë Bontemps is my wife, she never changed her name. Do you know why Tushka was returned?

—She bit her mistress.

—She used to nip at my wife's ankles, said Ben, but Tushka never bit *me*. She's a terrific player and very affectionate. Tushka's a special cat. Can I take her?

—Let me call one of the volunteers. You will have to pay the $25 fee. You may wait with the other clients.

Ben waited for about five minutes. The room was full of worried pet owners and sick pets. A parrot with a broken beak was a particularly heart-rending sight.

The general hubbub of the waiting room was interrupted by a woman's high shriek. A medium-sized gray cat came bounding into the waiting room, slid to a stop, spotted Ben, and in three big leaps crossed over to Ben, jumping onto his lap.

—Tushka! You crazy cat, said Ben nuzzling and petting Tushka. Did you hurt that lady?

Tushka purred loudly, rubbing her whiskers on Ben's cheek.

—Tushka, I think our luck has changed.

To be continued