

Five Million Yen: Chapter 74: Coda

by Daniel Harris

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New York City

April 20th 1977

It was the first warm day of a late-arriving spring. Ben was sitting in his divorce lawyer's office on Maiden Lane in lower Manhattan.

—You made out pretty well, young man, said attorney Ed Resnik. The judge forced Zoë to pay you \$10,000 for your horns because of her irresponsible behavior; then the court rejected her claim of cruel and unusual treatment and *also* disallowed the half-million she demanded. Ben, we destroyed Zoë and her divorce lawyer, Arno Aghajanian. The judge awarded her nothing, zero, ziltch.

(And Gringovitch, thought Ben, sold Aghajanian a forged Gorky painting. That bitch and her conceited prick lawyer got exactly what they deserved, thought Ben.)

—Now for the million-dollar question, said Ben. How much do I owe *you*?

—I have my invoice here. It comes to \$19,378.13.

—Whew! That's some piece of change.

—There were four trips to L.A., private investigator fees, police record searches, and the usual expenses. It's not cheap to defeat Hollywood's top divorce lawyer.

19K is a lot less than 500K. So, how are you paying for this, Ben?

—That's a good question. I guess I'll start by signing the \$10,000 check over to you. After that, I'm tapped out. I bought an apartment

in Brooklyn for cash in December. It's going to take a few months to pay off what I owe you.

—Ben, it's time you became a responsible adult. You're paying too much tax, you're not using your equity properly and you need to settle down. You're going to burn out working at the pace you do. Why give all your money to the government? Not smart. Here's what I suggest: Take out a mortgage on your apartment. The interest is tax deductible. There are other benefits. I'm going to put you in touch with the best financial adviser I know, Dan Saucisson, known on the street as The Adviser. He'll put you on the right track. Paying me will be painless; you'll protect your money from inflation and save a bundle in taxes.

—I guess I have no choice. It's not like I'm struggling, but I sure don't save much.

—Look, Ben, you'll be thanking me a thousand times over. It's high time to do business like the big boys.

When Ben returned to his home at 35 Prospect Park West in Park Slope, Brooklyn, his answering machine message light was blinking. He pushed “play messages”:

—Ben this is Lena. I have news for you. Call me. I'll be in my office late. *Ciao*.

It was 4 in the afternoon in Brooklyn; it would be 10 at night in France. He dialed her number. Lena answered out of breath.

—*Allo*.

—It's Ben. You rang?

—Ben, I'm so glad you returned my call.

—You said you had news, Lena. Then Ben sang the chorus from Ray Charles's *I've Got News For You*, mimicking Ray Charles.

—Yes and no, said Lena laughing at Ben's imitation of Ray Charles. Arno Donax is out of hospital. The Concertgebouw Orchestra has contracted him for *Constellations*. Ben, you've lost the gig.

—Shit!

—It's my fault. I was careless, and Marcello found out about our assignments, so he changed his mind about hiring you for *Constellations* next May. Hausenstockmann is furious.

—But Donax doesn't have the chops to play that part!

—Everyone knows that. Maybe something will change.

—What's the good news?

—I've been hired as co-curator at the Guggenheim from September through February. The show I'm hanging here tonight, *Avant-Garde European Painting*, will move to the Guggenheim in New York in January.

—That's great news. Maybe we'll enjoy some private time together.

—There's other good news. The museum bought Gringovitch's *Abstract With Yellow*. There'll be another \$25,000 headed to your bank in a few days.

—The good news is excellent, but the bad news is awful. I am really disappointed.

—Sorry, Ben. I tried to save the gig for you. But now I must go. I have twenty people working to install the new show and they all have questions for me. I'll call you this weekend. Big kiss. *Ciao*.

Just as Ben was about to hang up the phone, his cat Tuschka leapt at the coil-cord and pulled the handset from his hand.

—Tuschka! Ben chased her into the kitchen where she leapt on the counter, turned and gave Ben the “aren't I a clever kitty” look.

Outside of the commission money, Ben wasn't so sure there was any good news in that call. He desperately wanted the *Constellations* gig with the Concertgebouw orchestra. It was a history book gig. His playing, more than anyone's, had made *Constellations* the success it was in Monte Carlo. He liked Lena, but he wanted that gig more than her. But how to convince Marcello of that?

He and Lena were too much alike, very *simpatico*. Sometimes there was passion, but they were best friends rather than lovers.

Ben suspected that Lena was using him as revenge for Marcello's philandering. They would always be great friends, plus she had connections that were very beneficial to him. This she had proven many times, even risking perjury to protect him from Dan Arris's accusations of complicity in Olivia Krackenthorpe's murder.

And then there was his beloved Monique. Ben wondered where she was, and if and when she would contact him now that he was divorced from Zoë. He tried not to think about Monique, but she was *the woman*.

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Amsterdam, May 17, 1978

Hausenstockmann, Marcello, Arno Donax and Serge Nobokolov were in a rehearsal studio at the Concertgebouw. It was not a happy scene.

—Arno, you're faking the part. What you're playing is just not correct, said Marcello Metronomini, flipping his baton on his score in exasperation. It is less than two days until the performance. You are no closer to correctly performing this part than a month ago. Did your accident give you disabilities that are hindering you?

—I'll have it, Maestro. Don't worry, said Arno. This part is much more difficult than the part I originally learned.

—Arno, is there another instrument you could use for *Constellations*? asked Hausenstockman. That metal instrument just doesn't have the sonic richness of a wooden instrument.

—I am a LeBlanc artist, said Arno. I can't use another manufacturer's instrument. It would violate my contract.

After a conference between Hausenstockmann, Metronomini and the orchestra board, it was decided that *if* they could contract Ben Clarone and *if* he were available to take the job, they would cancel all Arno Donax's engagements with the orchestra, including the American tour in the autumn.

Ben was in an overdub session at Bright Star Recording Studios in New York City when Heather from his service called him. Ben returned her call at the end of the session.

—Heather, what's up?

—Ben, you must call Marcello Metronomini immediately. They want you to leave for Amsterdam ASAP. I've arranged the tickets. You leave from JFK tonight at 10:50. You will arrive in time for tomorrow afternoon's dress rehearsal.

—It's about time they came to their senses. Give me the number; I'll call him now. You'll have to find some subs for my jobs Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

—Please, call them, *immediately*, said Heather. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Ben. When the press finds out about your last minute replacement of Donax, you will be a musical hero. The concerts are being recorded for rebroadcast. You'll be making history.

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Ben arrived at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport at noon, Thursday May 18, 1978. The orchestra manager and an assistant met him as he exited customs.

—How was your flight? asked the orchestra manager.

—I don't remember, I slept the whole trip, said Ben. I could eat though.

—The *Constellations* rehearsal begins at 3:15. Maestro Metronomini wants to go over the score before the Mahler rehearsal begins. There are minor changes from the Monte Carlo premiere.

—Changes? asked Ben. I have a copy of my contrabass clarinet part with me.

—We are using the new Universal Edition version. You will have a printed part. It has some slight changes from the version you premiered and recorded in Monte Carlo eighteen months ago.

They led Ben to a rehearsal room. Maestro Metronomini, Hausanstockmann, Nobokolov and Lena Koshka were gathered, waiting for Ben.

—Maestro Marcello Metronomini, said the orchestra manager, introducing Ben.

—Please to meet you, said Marcello shaking Ben's hand. Thank you for filling in on such short notice. I believe you know my wife, Lena Koshka, and of course you know Serge and Hans.

(Marcello was very smooth, thought Ben, not a hint of animosity. But why was Lena here? Is she protecting me from Marcello's wrath?)

—Hello, everyone. It's great to play *Constellations* again. I'm looking forward to performing with such a distinguished orchestra and conductor.

—When you are ready Mr. Clarone, I would like to start each section so you will know my *tempi*.

Ben assembled his contrabass, picked a reed, wetted it, and played a blistering six-octave descending chromatic scale and nodded to Marcello, who was not impressed. Hans Hausenstockmann had a big smile on his face. Nobokolov even gave Ben a grin. Lena lowered her head and hid her smile.

—I'm ready, Maestro, said Ben.

The session was more of a talk-through than a playing rehearsal.

—*Constellations* begins the concert, said Marcello. The second half is Mahler's *Second Symphony*, which we are rehearsing first today. Hans will show you other changes to your part.

—That's a blockbuster concert, Maestro, said Ben. I'm really psyched to perform in one of the legendary concert halls in the world.

—We are pleased you could fill in at the last minute, said Marcello. You can thank Lena for suggesting you.

Ben wondered what *that* meant. Did she make a connubial deal with Marcello?

Ben had not played, or even looked at, *Constellations* since November 1976. While the orchestra rehearsed the Mahler, he studied his part quickly, but carefully, memorizing changes between the printed part and his handwritten part. Page turns were going to

be a problem. He would ask to have some pages copied so he could avoid the awkward page turns.

Ben nailed the part in the rehearsal. There were some minor timing glitches, because of bad page turns, but nothing serious. The orchestra was flawless. *Constellations* took on a whole new meaning in the astounding acoustics of the hall. Marcello added some Italian flash, which gave the work an enhanced dramatic luster. Ben gloried in the sound of his contrabass clarinet in the hall. He and Nobokolov played together like synchronized Swiss watches. It was hard to believe they hadn't played the work in eighteen months.

—You must be exhausted, said Nobokolov.

—I slept eight hours on the plane, said Ben, but I am a little jet-lagged. Sorry I missed your cue in the Orion section.

—Not a problem, I'm sure you'll get it tomorrow night. Ben, you are special. It's a privilege to work with you.

—Thank you, Serge. I was going to say the same. I think we take it up another notch when we play together.

Unlike Monte Carlo, there were no multi-media components for these concerts, only the music. Ben and Serge stood on either side of Marcello. There was no doubt about Marcello's conducting gifts. From the downbeat until the last note, his conducting inspired the orchestra, as well as Ben and Serge. The audience would not stop applauding. As a prearranged encore, Ben and Serge repeated the Gemini section, which featured Ben and Serge in an astounding display of virtuosity. Marcello gave them four solo bows, always to much whistling, bravos and rhythmic clapping.

Serge and Ben shared a dressing room. They both were dripping with perspiration.

—Ben, have some of this vodka, said Serge toweling his face. The best you will ever drink.

Ben took a full glass.

—To *Constellations*, said Serge.

—Yes, to *Constellations*, replied Ben.

The vodka sublimated in his mouth.

—Wow, Serge. Where did you find this vodka? It is amazing

There was a reception for the orchestra, chorus and soloists at the Rijksmuseum across the square. Ben was in no mood for parties. He was tired and sleep deprived. He was the last musician to leave the Concertgebouw. He had his backpack. His instrument was safely in a locker in the hall. He knew he had to make an appearance at the party, but his body demanded rest.

As he exited the stage door, a woman dressed in a red coat and stylish cloche hat approached him.

—Excuse me Mr. Clarone, she said in Dutch-accented English. I think you know me.

Ben flexed his knees a bit to see her face, obscured in the shadow of her hat brim.

—Monique! My god, it's really you. I can't believe it's you!

—I read that you were divorced, she said laughing at Ben's surprise. I told you I would contact you when Zoë and the *parazzi* were out of your life.

—Monique, what a surprise. I can barely believe my luck. Why are you here?

—To see you, silly boy. I live in Amsterdam now.

They stood looking at each other. Ben, completely overwhelmed, stepped forward and took her in his arms.

—Monique, I've missed you so much.

—And I've missed you, but my life has changed.

—How?

—I work in an art gallery in Amsterdam. I was fired from Pan Am.

—Because of me, I'm sure. Monique, I can't take my eyes off of you. You make me so happy.

—Hold me, Ben. You were amazing tonight. I'm so proud of you.

—Monique, my life has changed. I'm ready for you.

—My life has too, Ben. I'm married.

Ben held her at arm's length cressfallen.

—I'm happy for you, he said trying to hide his disappointment.

—I couldn't wait for you. I suffered because of you. I hated you, but underneath I desired you more than anything in my life. My husband is a wonderful man, a businessman from a powerful family. No one would try to shoot him. I still harbor great affection for you, Ben. My heart cried out with love for you tonight, but I knew it couldn't be. Last night, I had dinner with Lena and Marcello. Lena told me: "Ben, he is a charged particle; there is no place in his life for a woman. Music is his mistress."

Ben was thunderstruck by the contradictions in Monique's words.

—I'm sorry, Ben.

—Not as sorry as I am.

—When do you leave for New York?

—Monday morning, first KLM flight to JFK. I'm only here to play *Constellations*. I have a big recording session on Tuesday in New York.

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Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam
Monday, May 23, 1978

—Excuse me, sir, said an officious Dutch stewardess, but you can't take that on the airplane. It is too large for the overhead bins or under the seat. You will have to check it.

—*Au contraire*, said Ben, still a little drunk from last night's party. My contrabass clarinet has a ticket.

He showed the stewardess his two tickets.

—Thank you Mr. Clarone. Welcome aboard.

Ben buckled his contrabass clarinet into the window seat and took his seat on the aisle. He was playing lead alto that night at the Village Vanguard with the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Big Band. He needed sleep and was becoming hung-over from last night's party. He put the seat blanket over his head. With luck he would be asleep before the plane left the ground.

—Excuse me, said a woman in a teal-blue Chanel suit, your case is in my seat.

—I don't think so, said Ben from under the blanket.

—Ben you can't hide from me.

—Monique! What are you doing here?

—I'm traveling to the home of Ben Clarone.

—But you are married. That can't be.

—Ben, you are such a naïf. You believe everything a woman tells you?

—What do you mean? Are you married or not?

—I'm not married yet, I belong with Benjamin Franklyn Clarone and he belongs with me.

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35 Prospect Park West

Brooklyn, NY June 12, 2012

35 Years Later

—Ben, you seem so despondent, said Monique from the stove.

—Well 'Nique, I can't seem to adjust to the retired life, ever since I broke my shoulder in that fall on black ice, I'm at loose ends.

—But you are producing records and composing.

—Yes, but there is something festering in me.

—What? said Monique filling Ben's coffee cup.

—I don't know, some other creative outlet. Maybe I should take up painting or sculpture.

The telephone rang. Monique answered in the den.

—Ben, Zeno Gringovitch from Rome, said Monique handing him the phone.

—Zeno! What a surprise.

—Ben, said Zeno, I have terrible news. My dad hanged himself.

—No! said Ben in disbelief, Anatoly Gringovitch dead? When?

—Last night. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on Friday. Since Francesca died two years ago from breast cancer, he has had

no life. He's done no work at all. This recent diagnosis pushed him over the edge.

—When is the funeral?

—There is none. Suicides don't get funerals in Italy. My brother Dante has arranged for the body to be taken to Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. That's where Francesca is buried and there is a plot next to her for dad. I'm afraid we will be knocking your door tomorrow.

—Of course, Zeno. You and Dante are always welcome. How many of you are there?

— Seven with wives and children. We'll stay at Anatoly's Brooklyn house on 3rd Street, not far from you. Sorry to call so early, but I knew you would want to know. There will be an obit in the *New York Times* tomorrow. His gallery is handling all the arrangements.

* * *

Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY
June 18, 2012

Ben and Monique sat on a park bench in the Long Meadow in Prospect Park. It was their 35th wedding anniversary. They had seen the Gringovitch tribe off and were enjoying a perfect June evening. They had a picnic basket, a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

—'Nique. Here's to you and thirty-five years. I have not regretted one day since you came to Brooklyn with me.

—You're so sweet, Ben, she said, I've loved you since I first saw you on that Pan Am flight to Nice in 1976. Fondest memories.

They sat and watched the people and their dogs, rollerbladers, strollers, ball players and the deepening of the colors as the light began to fade.

—This neighborhood has really changed for the better since we were married 35 years ago., said Monique.

—I guess I made the correct choice. A real estate woman told me yesterday our apartment was worth well over two million. Not bad for a \$35,000 investment.

—Ben, I could never think of leaving here. It's where we became husband and wife. Raised our sons. There are too many cherished memories. Don't you dare sell our home.

—When I fell on that patch of black ice last winter, I thought we should move to Florida, or some warmer place, maybe the Italian Riviera or Mexico.

—Ben, you need a project, stop thinking about moving. You should write a novel about how we met. It's a pretty good story.

—'Nique, you always have good ideas.

—What would you call it?

—Good question, got any suggestions?

Ben watched brother and sister boarder collies vying to catch a Frisbee. The female timed it perfectly.

—How does *Five Million Yen* sound?

fine

