

Five Million Yen: Chapter 8

by Daniel Harris

Readers can find precious installments by clicking on my name under the title.

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The suit reading the *News* folded the paper and the headline disappeared.

I hope that's not the SRO I think it is.

Ben was too hungry to give it more thought, though while eating his delicious breakfast, thoughts of who was dead and who was hurt blunted his enjoyment.

He finished the omelet and started in on the short stack. He drowned the cakes in syrup.

Never can have enough syrup.

He remembered once he had a short residency at Bennington College, thanks to Bill Dixon, and had come home with a gallon of real maple syrup. Zoë hated it. More for me he would say. He used maple syrup to sweeten everything.

-You want my *Times*?

-Thank you, that's very kind.

The suit left a quarter tip on the counter. Ben noticed his face was pretty messed up.

Ben stopped eating and started skimming the paper for local news. He didn't find anything in the *Times*, but the *Times* found the syrup on his plate.

The bus boy was going by with a copy of the *Daily News* on his tray of dirty dishes.

-Chico. ¿Por favor, puedo tener el periódico?

The busboy held the tray and Ben finessed the *Daily News* off the tray without disturbing the dishes.

-Gracias, amigo.

-De nada.

The counterman started taking his dirty dishes.

-Anything else?

-I'll have a refill on the coffee and the check.

-Coming up.

Ben read the headline again and looked at a gruesome Weegee-like photo of a badly beaten body in a slummy looking flop.

It didn't look like Rita, but then who knew which SRO the story was about.

"Three residents of the Artist's Studios SRO, on the upper west side, were attacked in their rooms. One is dead and two were severely beaten. The injured were taken to New York-Presbyterian hospital in critical condition. The two injured victims were identified by responding officers as Rita Olivera, a sometime prostitute and petty criminal, and Carl Swan, a WW II vet, who has lived at the hotel since being discharged from the Navy in 1953. The police, pending notification of next-of-kin, did not release the name of the dead man. According to Rodney Stickem, the desk clerk on duty at the time of the incidents, it was probably a drug or turf feud.

Police have issued warrants for three suspects: Leroy Burr, aka "Big Stinger"; Victor Ruiz, aka "Shadow"; and Ben Clareone, a transient, who left the hotel about the time of the incident. Leroy Burr is a notorious flamboyant pimp and smalltime hood. Victor Ruiz, a thief with a long record, aquired the handle "Shadow" for his skill as a pickpocket and cat burglar. Ben Clarone, is a musician in the city and the estranged husband of Zoe Bontemps, who is currently starring in the TV hit, *I'd Rather Not*. Miss Bontemps could not be reached for comment at her Beverly Hills hotel."

-I am seriously screwed.

Ben took a last sip of coffee, left a tip, put the *Times* and the *News* under his arm and got in line to pay his check.

What to do? If he went to his service, the police might be waiting. He needed a place to live and money. He had no ID and needed to access his bank accounts.

He also had to get back the five million yen check so he would have serious money. A lawyer was also high on his list. The NYPD was looking for him and probably “Big Stinger” and “Shadow”, too. He needed to find out if Zoë left him anything and where.

His only choice was to hope Heather and Hilary at his service had not read *The Daily News*. It was Monday and October, they would be pretty busy. Plus, if those two broads read anything, it was probably only fashion or celebrity mags.

Ben crossed Broadway and entered the Brill building. He took the elevator to the third floor. Entering his service's office he saw Hilary at the front desk.

-Ben!

-Hilary! What's happened? You look like you got a big beauty treatment since I last saw you. Are you in love?

-Good guess. I have a new beau.

-I could tell. I need to see Heather to get my mail and messages.

-I think she is expecting you. She said she saw you at the deli.

How was your tour?

-I'll tell you later.

Hilary buzzed him into the main area where he went to Heather's desk. She was on the phone. Ben took a chair and waited.

-Sorry, Ben. It has been crazy busy. Let me get your messages and mail.

She went back to the secure area and returned with a milk crate-sized box.

-Here it all is. Three months of mail and messages. You can use the table over there to go through it. Most of it is probably junk or out-of-date.

Ben took the box and went to the table. Most of the messages were those pink phone message slips. There was a letter and a big envelope. He opened the letter.

The note was in Zoë's loopy handwriting in a blue ballpoint:

Ben,

Sorry about what has happened. I wanted to talk to you before you left on the tour.

It was impossible because of the long hours you were putting in with those Japanese people.

I've always liked you. I even thought I might grow to love you. I didn't. Sorry, that's how I am.

In the big envelope are the license plates for the car, which I sold for five hundred dollars. I'm giving you one hundred of that. The pawn tickets for your instruments are also in that envelope. Sorry about the horns, but I needed relocation money. Your clothes and other stuff I left in the apartment.

Now that I'm making good money, I don't need or want you. You have to learn to respect women. You and your friends are condescending assholes towards women. Don't try to contact me. My lawyer will contact you. You're on your own, Big Boy.

Z

Ben opened the big manila envelope. There were two license plates, six pawn tickets from Ninth Avenue Gold & Pawn, and a receipt from the Animal Medical Center for euthanizing a ten year-old male Russian Blue cat.

Shit! She even off'd my cat, Tuschka.

There was a crisp Franklin in the envelope.

A hundred dollars, two license plates, six pawn tickets, and the cat's death warrant: the remains of a marriage.

Ben stared at the floor.

Heather came up with a paper cup of coffee.

-You might need this.

-Thanks Heather. A martini might be better.

-There's a little something in the coffee.

Ben took a sip and gagged.

-What did you put in this, Heather?

-Cheap Red Top 151 proof rum.

Heather bent over and slapped him on the back revealing big cleavage

-Zoë told me a few things when she dropped off the envelopes. Sorry Ben.

Heather was the bra-and-panties peep-show girl of the office. Her legs were almost as good as Zoë's and she had a slightly bigger bust. She looked ripe, but women were not priority *uno* at the moment.

I have to come up with a plan. If I go to the flop to see if I can beat my ID's and the check for five million yen out of Rodney, the cops will be waiting for me. They might even have frozen my bank accounts. Not only that, I have no way of proving who I am.

My last best chance is Anatoly Gingovitch in Brooklyn. The old Ruskie painter has lots of connections. I stayed in his atelier in Paris on rue Charenton. Maybe I can even crash at his Brooklyn crib. I know he lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn. If I can contact him, he can help. I think his address was on Third Street. Wish I had my address book. Time for a train ride back to Brooklyn.

-Thanks, Heather. I will leave this stuff here and check in with some friends uptown. I need a place to crash.

-OK. But you know the cops are looking for you.

Jesus, she must have seen the *News*.

-Thanks Heather. I owe you. Dinner and a show, I promise.

-You're such a tease, Ben. That's why we love you.

Ben shouldered his pack. He put the C-note in his wallet with his busker money and put the *Times* and the *News* under his arm. Subway reading material.

He blew a kiss to Hilary and walked out the front door into the hallway to the elevator.

-Ben Clarone, I believe that's my *New York Times*.

-?

-Don't make a fuss. Lieutenant Harold Smith, homicide, NYPD. He flashed his shield.

-Come with me. Don't make me put the cuffs on you.

They went down the elevator in silence. Smith was wearing a derby hat and the same suit as the crossword guy at the deli. Ben looked closer at his face, which looked like it was undergoing multiple surgeries.

-What do you want with me? I just flew in from Tokyo.

-Hope your arms aren't too tired.

I guess that passed for cop humor.

There was a NYPD prowl car in front of the building. A charter bus was honking loudly at it. A big Irish cop got out of the driver's door and gave a "fuck you" to the bus driver.

-Should I cuff him, Lieutenant?

-Probably better, but in front, not back.

The big cop cuffed him. Then he opened the curbside rear door and pushed Ben's head down, as he not so gently ushered him into the back seat. The lieutenant put Ben's pack in the trunk.

-This is my partner, Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill. He can be unfriendly, so don't try anything.

Mulvihill whooped the siren and gunned it down to 47th, sped over to Eighth Avenue, and headed uptown.

No one said anything.

At Columbus Circle, Mulvihill cut over to Broadway.

-Don't you live on 71st?

-Used to Lieutenant. Not anymore.

-You know there is a warrant for your arrest — murder one.

Ben kept his mouth shut.

Mulvihill, slowed way down as if he were checking pedestrians on the sidewalk. Cars started to honk at them.

Each time one honked, Mulvihill flashed the Mars lights and whooped the siren.

-An undercover cop, Reynard, can vouch for me.

Mulvihill checked him out in the rear view mirror.

-We don't know any undercover cops in that flop.

Ben's trump card failed.

Then Lieutenant Smith turned in his seat and looked at Ben.

-Who's the Naked Lady?

-Don't know what you're talking about.

-I think you do. Your prints are all over her.

To be continued.

