

Five Million Yen: Chapter 9

by Daniel Harris

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Mulvihill turned left on 72nd and then right onto Riverside Drive. He parked the car in front of a fire hydrant.

-We're going for a little walk. You sit tight, Clarone.

Mulvihill and Smith got out of the car and walked up the street and around the corner on 74th.

Ben sat in the back, his wrists in cuffs. There were no door handles.

Naked Lady? I know that from somewhere. Then he remembered. That's what they called those old 1930's and 40's Conn saxophones, Naked Ladies. How would Smith know that? I hope that doesn't mean that David Seltzer is the guy who was murdered.

Smith and Mulvihill were standing on the corner of 74th street. A black 1965 battered Chevy Impala pulled up to the corner. Mulvihill leaned in and was talking to the driver. It sure looked like some undercover cop car. They drove the most beat-up junkers. Mulvihill stood up laughing.

The car drove off. Smith was talking on a police radio. The two detectives sauntered back to the prowler car.

Ben noticed the singer, James Taylor, pushing a stroller down the sidewalk.

Christ, I don't need him seeing me in the back of a prowler car. I did a session with him before I left on tour. Ben laid down on the back seat. He could just make out anyone passing on the sidewalk by the tiny view he had of the rear view mirror.

Mulvihill opened the street side back door.

-Sit up. Give me your hands.

He unlocked the cuffs and put them in his belt.

-Behave yourself.

He closed the door.

Smith got in the other rear door and sat next to Ben. Smith's face was messed up. Everything looked fake, or in a state of repair and restore.

-Lieutenant, aren't you supposed to read me my Miranda Rights?

-You are not under arrest. Anything you tell me stays with me. Anything I tell you stays with you. Mulvihill is going for coffee. So, let's talk.

-Where were you last Friday night?

This sure seemed like a set-up. When he thought about it, Friday night seemed like a month ago.

-Anchorage, Alaska in the international transit lounge waiting for my plane to be repaired.

-Where were you before that?

-Tokyo.

-What were you doing in Tokyo?

-I just finished a three-month global tour with a Japanese-American group that was playing contemporary Japanese and American music as part of the Bicentennial celebrations.

-When did you arrive in New York City?

-I arrived at JFK about eight o'clock Saturday night.

-Where did you go?

-I took a cab to what I thought was my home, 236 West 71st.

-What happened there?

-Where is this going?

-I'm trying to find out how you got to Artist's Studios.

-Well, I arrived there to find that my wife, Zoë Bontemps, had vacated our apartment. Another tenant was in what was our apartment.

-What did you do?

-I went down and talked to the super. He told me Zoë had left six weeks before. He let me use his phone.

-Does the super live alone?

-Mostly. He has a couple of grown children. He's divorced from their mother. His daughter Rita was there when I used the phone.

-Who did you call?

-I called Bright Star recording studio. I asked if I could stash my musical instruments there. I couldn't carry that many for long and I needed a safe place for them.

-Did you?

-Yes.

-Then where did you go?

-I didn't have much American money, so I heard from one of the techs at the studio that a lot of traveling guys would stay at this SRO up on 103rd street. I decided to try it since I only had twenty-two dollars.

-Did you have any other money?

-Yes, a pocket full of strange coins and a check from the Japanese government for five million yen.

-How much is five million yen worth in American money?

-There's 308 yen to the dollar. That's about sixteen thousand dollars. I was promised a minimum of five thousand a month, plus travel and per diem.

-That's a lot of money for a no-name musician.

-Well, in the new music world I'm not a no-name. I also have a good reputation as a studio musician.

Why were cops always such jerks to musicians, thought Ben?

-What happened when you got to the SRO?

-I checked in with Rodney Stickins.

-Did he know how much money you had?

-Yes and no. When he asked how I was going to pay I said I had five million yen.

-That was stupid.

-In hindsight, it sure was.

Mulvihill returned with two coffees. He opened Smith's side of the back seat and handed him his coffee and closed the door. Mulvihill put his coffee cup on the front hood of the car and his foot on the front fender. He started eating a powdered jelly donut.

Fits the profile, thought Ben.
Smith sipped his coffee.

-OK, Clarone, so you paid for the room with U.S. dollars. Did you have the clerk put the check and your passport in the hotel safe?

-No. I didn't get a warm fuzzy feeling about this Stickins guy.

-What room did he assign you?

-7D.

-Strange. That's a woman-only floor at that SRO.

-Hey, I was just a guy needing a room. I didn't know the rules of the place.

-What time did you get to your room?

-I don't know, about eleven, eleven-thirty at night.

-Do you know a David Seltzer?

-Kinda. You see after I got to my room, I took a shower and a shave. I didn't smell too good since I had been traveling for five days from Tokyo. We had a mechanical and were stuck in Anchorage.

-I heard that already.

-I got back to my room and I had been robbed of everything. All I had was my toiletries kit and a bathrobe. I went down to the front desk to report the robbery, and when I got back my toiletry kit was gone.

-What did you do?

-Nothing.

-What did you do on Sunday?

-Well, I confronted Mr. Stickins and told him to have my stuff back in my room by nightfall.

-Why did you tell him that? Did you think he was the thief?

-Maybe not the bagman, but he told someone about my check for five million yen. I think someone broke into my room and took all my ID, money and clothes. The clothes so I wouldn't leave.

-You think David Seltzer took your belongings?

-Hell, no. Excuse me lieutenant. David loaned me a pair of slippers and some pants. His neighbor Carl loaned me a shirt.

-Why would David loan you a pair of slippers and pants, if he just robbed you of your clothes?

Ben could see where this was headed.

-You are making some mistaken assumptions, Lieutenant.

-So correct me.

-David was playing "On Green Dolphin Street" on his saxophone on Saturday night. Sunday afternoon after I talked to Stickins, I went down to the sixth floor to see if I could find the saxophone player. David's door was open and I saw that Conn big-bell tenor. That model is sometimes called the "Naked Lady." I introduced myself and then played a few chouses of "On Green Dolphin Street" on David's Naked Lady. Great horn. He told me he bought a bottle and played old standards every Saturday night.

Ben gave Smith his best x-ray interrogative stare.

So, Lieutenant, how do you know those horns are called Naked Lady?

-Some junky pinched Gerry Mulligan's Naked Lady baritone saxophone a few years back. I recovered it. Sal Frompini told me the history and why players want them. Go on.

-David fed me and afterwards Carl came in and loaned me a shirt. The three of us sat around for a couple of hours talking about music and our life stories.

-What happened then?

-I went back to my room.

-Then what?

-My clothes had been returned, but not my ID's, money or the check.

-Who returned them?

-I found out later it was Rita Olivera, my old super's daughter.

-Were these the clothes you had when you checked in, or were they ones she got from your old apartment. Maybe from her father?

-No, they were the clothes from my traveling pack, except for the tux, which was missing and of course all my ID's and money.

-Did Rita say how she got them?

-She took them.

-Rita stole your clothes?

-That's what she said. Big Stinger is her pimp. He put her up to it. He and his sidekick Victor were going to hold me hostage and get me to cash the check and then take the money. Rita told me Rodney tipped them off that I was packing big bucks.

Mulvihill had his police radio up to his ear. He dumped his coffee and quickly walked around the car, got in, whooped the siren and started speeding up Riverside Drive

-Just got a call. The desk clerk at Artist Studios has been murdered. Sounds like Clarone's friends are back at work.

-Don't drive so fast. This isn't a chase. Dead people don't get up and walk away.

Mulvihill slowed down and turned the Mars lights off.

-So, Clarone, that doesn't explain why you bludgeoned David Seltzer to death with the Naked Lady.

-I didn't do that. I wasn't in the building when that happened. One of your guys, called himself Reynard, he flashed a NYPD shield and told me to get out of the building as fast as possible. Gave me a dollar and said go as far south as I could and take the sea air. I went to Coney Island.

Mulvihill turned around.

-Listen punk, I told you the NYPD doesn't have any stoolies in that flop. Cops don't give people money.

-Well, I did what he told me to do.

Smith took a loud sip of his coffee.

-Clarone, did you see this Reynard before or after you beat up Rita?

-I didn't beat up Rita, I saved her life.

-Beating someone so badly they need life support is not most people's idea of saving a life.

-OK Lieutenant, here's what Rita told me. She came to my room after I returned from seeing David and Carl. She was very distressed. She told me that Big Stinger and Victor were after her for returning my clothes; and also, they were out to get David and Carl for giving me clothes. She also said that Rodney had tipped

them off and had put all my ID's and the check in the hotel safe for them after the robbery. She told me to get out of the building immediately. She helped me load my pack and led me down a front staircase. I saw Reynard when I was going through the lobby on my way out. That's when he talked to me. I had spoken with him earlier in the day when I met him on the elevator going down to talk to Stickins.

Mulvihill started tapping the steering wheel with that impatient tempo someone makes when they think they are listening to a cock-and-bull story. Mulvihill was not buying it.

-Makes a cute story

-Skip the dramatics Mulvihill.

Smith was visibly annoyed

They cut across 96th street and turned up Broadway. There were cop cars blocking 103rd and up at the corner of 104th.

Mulvihill double-parked the car. He left the Mars lights and flashers on. He cuffed Ben to a bracket on the back of the front seat. Smith and Mulvihill walked up to 104th. On the corner they talked to a uniformed cop who came down and stood next to the rear door of the prowler car.

How could they think I killed or beat up anyone? Especially using a great horn like David's Naked Lady as a murder weapon?

Ben looked out the window. They were parked in front of **Abe's Appliance, Radio & TV**. There was a picture of David Seltzer in the window. It showed David sitting at an electronics repair bench. There was a hand-lettered sign underneath.

R.I.P David T. Seltzer May 26 1916-October 24 1976.

The electronics wizard of Broadway was murdered last night.

We will miss him

Help police find the killer(s) If you know something call
COP-TIPS."

Ben looked over the top of the storefronts and he could see the top floors of the back of Artist's Studios. Near the top floor he could

just make out the shape of a man. He was working from window ledge to window ledge.

-Jesus! That must be Victor "The Shadow" Ruiz, the cat burglar. I bet he copped my check and my ID's out of the safe. My money is up on that ledge!

To be continued.

