

Big In Japan

By Christopher Bundy

-Baby, You're a Rich Man-

Kent Richmond lay in his walk-in closet full of blue, gray, brown and black. He got high just looking at the suits lined along both sides of the closet, a soft carpet underneath his feet, the smell of clothes: new, pressed, and dry-cleaned. He admired the twinkle of halogen lights reflected in polished leather, black and brown on and on along a shoe rack that ran the length of the closet. To the front, at least three dozen shirts waited in a variety of colors, each one wrapped in clear plastic. Pants followed in shades of dark and light. At the back of the closet hung several dozen silk ties, colorful emblems of his success. While Kent had already done his bit for TV today - a guest panelist on a game show in which contestants performed pop renditions karaoke-style, most of it in his characteristic Savile Row pinstripe and open dress shirt - he still liked to imagine himself wrapped in the fine fabrics of rich, successful men.

Kent took a hit from a glass pipe the color of crystal, a smoky mix of methamphetamines the Japanese called *shabu* that would carry him through until Friday, then two days of sleep. He lay on the closet floor in a sprawling X. On his back, he stared up at the parallel rows of suits, the shelves above lined with dozens of shoe boxes, sweaters, sweatshirts and stacks of new shirts. He pushed blue smoke to the ceiling with a long, slow release. He felt fine. Better than fine. So fine. Wouldn't it be nice if Monique...Monique of Montreal... *Comment ça va, Monique...?* Wouldn't it be nice if she were standing over him naked, an arch of smooth, white flesh? The *shabu* slithered into his veins and inflated him with the smoke of liveliness. I am the earth, I am the sea, I am the sky... I am the universe; he repeated the mantra that helped him through the tedium and aggravation of celebrity.

Kent Richmond was big in Japan. Kent Richmond was the hot, number-one *RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!* on the Tokyo-produced game show *The Strange Bonanza*, where he had become the most well-loved *gaijin-tarento* since the "two Kents": Kent Gilbert and Kent Derricott. He was shaggy brown hair with blond highlights. He was Gucci shoes and Hermes watch, diamond earring and L.A. dental work. He was the face of Lark cigarettes, PECKUP! Energy Drink, and Sankyou Instant Ramen. He was sometime husband to a part-time magazine model and full-time *shabu* junkie Kumi Sato. He was the glimmering *gaijin* with a keen understanding of Japanese wit and a dead ringer for a young John Lennon.

Kumiko Sato bounced on the bed to The Ramones "I Wanna Be Sedated" as she wound up for a nighttime photo shoot for a cell phone company. She bounced, her clean-cut bob flapping like wild, but useless, bird wings on the side of her head. Each bounce appeared an attempt at flight, at bouncing herself right through the roof and out of their Tokyo apartment. She bounced in the kind of undress that crowned countless school and work-desk reveries of boys and men across Japan - in a pair of oversized tighty-whities. The same iconic image that was splashed across thousands of subway posters. Except in the ad, her breasts were covered by two green apples and the words Green Apple in green. Advertisers believed Kumi Sato's oversized underwear would sell laundry

detergent, which it did. But it wasn't just her oversized underwear that sold mountain-spring-scented alkaline compounds and made her an *idoru*. With Kumi's brand of pout, the nation's favorite pair of lips, she could wind up a wholesome, toothy smile for anyone's clothes, gadget, or soft drink. Her swollen lips, clumsy skinniness and wide, sinless eyes could sell anything. Kent joked regularly that you could put shit on a plate in front of Kumi, and consumers would be crawling the department stores asking where they could get some of that shit on a plate for themselves.

Just before their well-publicized wedding two years earlier, fans had voted Kent & Kumi Tokyo's 'Best Celebrity Couple'. The two lived a grand life. There were more guest appearances, club openings, and civic functions than the charmed couple could manage. To survive the celebrity circuit, they had started smoking *shabu*, a chic concoction of methamphetamine hydrochloride that kept them wide-eyed and, well, bouncy. The striking pair could shake hands kiss cheeks sing karaoke drink drinks smoke smokes dance trance and babble bullshit in long stretches without food or sleep.

Celebrities like Kent & Kumi needed long stretches without the interruption of basic needs like food and sleep. Who had time? *Shabu* kept them smiling and thin, as long as it lasted. *Shabu* was starving their bodies of sustenance and sleep but they felt great, most of the time. *Shabu* lifted them quickly, left them scraping the ceiling of the sky for days. But when the ice evaporated, their bodies let go in an unstoppable slide towards exhaustion. Then they slept for three days straight. Kent and Kumi had lived this way for a year, but they hardly resembled the cheerful celebrity couple that had once dominated the personality trade. Smoking *shabu* had become the only way to get up (and stay up) for work, offers of which had recently begun to decrease. And, lately, their alternating schedules demanded that while one got up the other went down.

But Kent had few complaints. His Lennon face had gotten him noticed when little else might have - he had no real talents, he knew this. But he had been smart enough to exploit the resemblance, and learn Japanese and a few key chords on the guitar. The Japanese liked that he looked like John Lennon. They liked his guitar and his earnest versions of "Imagine" and "Yesterday" (a Paul McCartney ballad, but they didn't care - they wanted "Yesterday"). Kent was asked to appear at premier club openings, special events, and holiday parties; they simply wanted him to be there. To be *RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!* And there was always the Lennon connection, the association that had gotten him through agency doors and on to Tokyo sound stages. Kent had represented a Japanese coffee house chain the real John Lennon had visited. He had broadcast for a Tokyo network from the opening of the John Lennon Museum in the Saitama Super Arena. He had even been introduced to Yoko Ono, an experience Kent found unsettling when she whispered to him: "Fortunately... you look like John. Unfortunately... you are not."

Kent smelled jasmine and opened his eyes to Kumi's face inches above his. "I'll see you after the shoot." Kumi kissed him on the nose, and stood, disappearing before he could respond. "Let's play videos tonight." Kent and Kumi, routinely wound up on *shabu*, played video games many nights at a local parlor, often spending thousands of yen until early morning.

With the remote control, he changed the music on the stereo to a mix of French trance. He hit the glass pipe the color of crystal again. He closed his eyes as *shabu* sent clean, empty signals to the embers of his brain. Kent heard shoes on the marble floor and wondered what Kumi had forgotten, when something heavy and unforgiving landed fast on his chest - the pain so swift, so intense, that he almost blacked out. In the darkness of panic and pain, he tried to breathe but had no luck, the pressure on his chest unbearable enough that he felt certain he would suffocate.

“*RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!* What say we talk?” a voice sang, as Kent felt his windpipe bow, certain to snap, he thought, like a piece of uncooked pasta.

Kent looked up to see Denis Ozman, a short, sturdy Australian with a bleached-blond Mohawk, looming over him.

-Big Man Waiting in the Dark-

Ozman, a young comic who called himself “Bigu Sukai,” had lately been stealing Kent’s press time. This was no great feat since Kent had been a bit scarce on TV, his commitment to *shabu* and subsequent recovery periods draining his desire and ability to function in front of a camera. Bigu Sukai’s latest gig was on Airship Japan, a new TV venue for comedians in Tokyo. Ozman was a student of the Japanese school of shock comedy and there was little he wouldn’t do for a laugh. He had stuffed lit cigarettes up his nose, run a samurai sword across his forearm, and swallowed live snakes - small potatoes for what he planned to introduce to Japanese audiences. Denis Ozman was just getting warmed up. Kent recognized he had been lucky, gotten in early, and hung on past his prime, but this new breed of *gaijin-tarento* was bringing things down to a more pedestrian level. With the global economy in the shitter, Kent’s competition on TV had grown as well. A whole new breed of fluent foreigners with pretty young faces popped up on the plentiful number of game shows that populated television schedules. There was work for them, but they were also polluting the pool. He was still *RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!*, but less-talented imitations crowded the market, a queue of amateurish idiots willing to do anything for a laugh. It had become a game of degrees. What level would you sink to for your fifteen minutes? Worse, Ozman had insulted Kent on national TV when he dressed up like *RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!* and farted out a mock version of “Yesterday.” The Japanese roared with laughter as he held a microphone to his ass, covered in green leotard and baby powder, and piped out the first remarkably recognizable notes of the popular song.

But Ozman wasn’t in Kent and Kumi’s apartment to discuss stage notes.

Kent had first met Monique at a club opening in Shibuya. Kent smiled at his good fortune. He told himself he had never cheated on Kumi. He had bedded women - and two men, as well - as a part of his job, flirting with just about anyone who recognized him for the celebrity he was. But Monique was special, no simple sycophant. At 5’11” and blond to the middle of her back, the up-and-coming model from Montreal had glowed a ghostly white in the club’s darkness. She seemed to believe that Kent might serve as a springboard for her burgeoning career, and he let her believe it, never considering resistance. By sleeping with her, Ozman’s wife, Kent also returned Ozman’s insult. But two months later Kent and Monique were still seeing each other.

Monique had reached Kent only hours earlier with a text message reading *YARU KA?* (You want a piece of me?). He answered N 30. The pair spent the afternoon in a love hotel smoking *shabu* and fucking. Earlier in the day, they had met in front of the Parco department store in the Shibuya District where both liked to shop. She was flawless in a taffeta blouse, a sequined miniskirt, and a pair of simple leather mules as if she had just stepped off the pages of a summer-issue fashion magazine. She was buoyant. And she smiled for Kent Richmond. They spent the afternoon in a love hotel near the Shibuya station called Hotel Cinematic. A discreet place with a kitschy movie theme. They chose 8 ½, the Fellini Room from a menu of lighted photographs. The room was overrun with Italian scenes and movie themes. Black and white photographs of Roman landmarks and stills from Fellini's movie hung on the walls. A hip-high replica of a rocket ship that looked more like an ancient Roman-era phallus stood by the bathroom. Faux columns were placed around an enormous bed, with a wall-to-wall mirrored ceiling above. Once in the bed, his body balanced by a cushy plain of silk, Kent watched Monique's reflection as she ground her hips in to him.

Kent understood the necessity of keeping their affair clandestine. Yet, as they went into their third month together, Kent began to experience an unsettling and nagging need to tell someone. He wanted people to know. Look at me; better yet, look at her then look at me. He wanted their envy. And he knew that mere speculation in the right clubs and the worst tabloids might give his career a necessary boost. But someone in his position required equilibrium, and Kent had always been careful to balance the nice with the naughty.

There were others to think of: Monique's sausage-necked husband, Ozman, the funnyman who stuck knitting needles through his cheeks. Despite the callings of his cock, Kent Richmond thought he had been careful not to be sloppy. Kumi, though she never read anything, not even the magazines in which she regularly appeared, hardly paid attention to what others said, and Kent never worried that she would consider a thing she heard from the rumor mill. Kent's wife of two years was a loner, hardly attached to anyone or anything.

Not even out of her teens, Kumi had begun modeling for shampoos, soaps, creams, and lotions - there was innocence in her pixie face and lean, schoolgirl figure. Kumi was seventeen when she first called Kent a star. So close to his twenty-three but so far away. In the beginning, he knew her only as the schoolgirl she pretended to be in print and TV ads. Her hair was bobbed, with bangs. She was taller than the other girls her age and remarkably sure of herself, yet still a-wobble with growing up. The moment he fell in love with her? Easy. He watched her peel a tangerine as she waited in the green room before a group photo shoot for a national charity. Her fingernails pushed through the spongy shell, her lips turning in concentration, tongue lodged in the corner of her mouth. The sections of the tangerine on her lap, a magazine underneath, a juice box indented and empty, the straw chewed into a hook. She caught him staring, smiled, and shuffled the tangerine slices around, absently picking up the juice box, drawing in a dry slurp. Her mouth closed in the slightest smile; and however subtle, there was kindness there. Kumi's face was usually written with a persistent pout, her mouth an exaggerated frown like yellow sad face, a preoccupation she was hardly aware of, her bottom lip swollen with gravity and distraction. But that day she smiled and she smiled at Kent.

Before Kent breathed his next breath or thought his next thought, Ozman slammed a fist into his windpipe, causing his throat to seize and shutting off oxygen to his brain.

Kent woke to find Ozman leaning over him again and smiling. Smoke poured from the Australian's nose and ears like Daffy Duck in a rage, a trick he had seen the comic perform on TV. Kent tried to move, but found his hands were bound behind him with duct tape, his ankles strapped to the legs of a chair in the living room.

"Worry not, mate, I promise results." Ozman slapped Kent's face, splitting his lip.

"She came to me," Kent said, confident he could talk his way out of this.

"You lie. What you did was wrong and hurtful. You took advantage of a young lady. And that ain't cool, mate. But I believe that if you simply get past the pain - see, you have caused me pain and I will return the favor - your life will unfold before you, transformed. So, how's about a trick?"

Ozman brought a firecracker from his pocket, stuck it between his teeth. "One, two... thareee!" And lit it with a lighter. The firecracker exploded with a raucous pop, smoke and red paper filling the space between them.

"Ow." Ozman smiled, gunpowder residue splashed across his cheeks. "Now you."

-Baby, You're a Dead Man-

Kent watched as Kumi entered their apartment, her face moving from confused amusement to shocked awareness. *Shabu* kept him confident this would all end with some sort of settlement, a compromise in which Kent apologized, and Ozman answered to reason and agreed to walk away. No need to involve the police or the media.

"Well, well, well. Enter the lovely Kumiko Sato. Back so soon?" Ozman opened his arms.

Kumi rushed to Kent's side, lifting his head in her hands. She looked up at Ozman. "What have you done to him?"

"Were you not so high for the better part of each day, perhaps you would have noticed that your husband has been fucking my wife."

With the sound of Kumi's crying, Kent thought for the first time in years of the Greek islands and their honeymoon there. He recalled the ocean rolling calmly outside their bungalow and the hush of evening over the remote island village, the smell of flowers and garlic and fresh fish. Kumi had moved in the kitchen like an angel, a breeze from an open window lifting her linen skirt. Then blood spread over the front of her white shirt when she cut her palm trying to trim a piece of cod. She whimpered all the way to the hospital, wrapped in Kent's arms. Now, just as he was then in the backseat of a Greek taxi, Kent believed he could ease Kumi's fear. His heart beat fast, and his body ached for a cigarette. The duct tape made his wrists itch, and he struggled to loosen its hold where Kumi had already started tearing it away. It gave a little, so that he could

scratch with his index and middle fingers, the fingernails of his right hand long for picking the guitar. His busted lip and broken nose were remote feelings now, replaced with an unfamiliar tightness in his chest.

“How does it feel, sweetheart, to be one of the beautiful people?” Ozman applied lipstick to Kumi’s celebrated pouty lips.

Her hands bound with duct tape, Kumi tried to laugh. But her defiance was dying, fear growing like the dark rose around Kent’s eye. Ozman gently pushed Kumi’s hair from her eyes, stood and turned to include Kent, opening his arms. “Thank you for your patience. I assure you a splendid time is guaranteed for all. Now, for my final and most magnificent trick.”

Ozman pulled Kumi up by her arms, steadying her on her feet, and leaned in to kiss her, more a caricature of a kiss than an actual kiss.

Kent struggled to speak. “Ozman, please. Let’s be reasonable. She had nothing to do with this.”

“You have ruined my marriage. Now, let’s talk about how I might ruin yours.”

Ozman had begun to sway suggestively in front of Kumi when a series of beeps sounded from the kitchen - “Yesterday” in ring tones. It was Kent’s cell phone with a new text message.

“Telephone,” Ozman sang and went to the kitchen. He picked up Kent’s phone from the table and read the message aloud. “U@? 911. Guess who?”

“Hey, *RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!* what say we send your girlfriend a reply, eh?” Ozman verbalized the message as he typed it into Kent’s cell phone. “@Hom. MEt... M... Hre. Enter Monique.”

With Ozman out of view in the kitchen, Kent struggled free from his severed bindings. Kumi’s presence there, her eyes wide with fear and her face smeared with lipstick, had moved Kent to action. A rush of optimism rose within and he ran for his bedroom closet. *Now for MY next trick.*

Kent had bought the 9mm from an American sailor stationed at Yokosuka with the US 7th Fleet for two-thousand dollars, a high price for such a gun, but the easiest way to find one in Japan. He wasn’t sure why he had bought the handgun, the purchase a spontaneous buy in a Roppongi bar. When he had first held the gun in his hand, he just knew he wanted the pistol. Though he had fired the gun only once - an accident in which he shattered the floor-to-ceiling mirror in his bedroom - he liked having it.

“*RI-CHU-MAN-SAN!* Where are you?” Ozman sang and stomped towards the hallway, the sound of his heavy boots kicking up a new terror.

The idea of that Beretta hidden away in a shoebox left Kent hopeful, nearly ecstatic. Lifting the lid on a Bruno Magli box, Kent’s hands shook, but there was the pistol. He held the gun for all of five seconds before it fell from his trembling hands. As Kent reached down to retrieve it, Ozman appeared at the closet doorway. Spying the gun, Ozman kicked Kent in the gut, sending his ass to the floor. Still, Kent remained hopeful - he could do this, he could outsmart, outtalk, outthink this Neanderthal in a mohawk. He rummaged for another weapon to fend against the mad Australian, coming up with a shoe - a Gucci loafer with a heavy heel. But Ozman was already there, pointing the pistol at Kent’s head. “Looking for this, cowboy?”

Kent stumbled back into the front room where Kumi, still bound in duct tape, glared disappointment. If they survived Ozman’s storm, would she ever forgive him for

his indiscretion? Denis sat before them, the Beretta bouncing in his right hand as he sat unusually quiet. “Now... we wait.”

Monique must have been close by because within fifteen minutes she knocked at the door to the Richmond-Sato residence.

Ozman waved the gun at Kent then at the door. “You’re on, lover boy.”

Kent hesitated, trying to think how he might turn the scene around, but realized it made little difference if Monique was there or not. He could do this.

“It’s open.”

“*Tadai...*” Monique called, removing her shoes and stepping into the living room before her face went white at the site of Ozman, his own smeared with lipstick, gun in hand.

“Monique! Come in.”

“Denis?” Monique’s left hand remained on the doorknob, one foot inching backwards.

“I know what you did.”

“Did you do this?”

“I’m teaching this slime a lesson about pain. Eye for an eye, all that.”

“Is that a real gun?”

“Lucky find, wouldn’t you say?”

“Are you out of your mind?” Monique reached a hand out, speaking to Ozman as if he were a cat with the gift of a dead bird in its mouth. You’re doing this for me, aren’t you? That’s sweet, love. But it’s unnecessary.”

“For you, no. Because of you, yes,” he said, dodging her.

“Well, I’m not impressed. And I’m leaving.”

Ozman reacted, skirting past her to the door. Monique took an assertive step forward but Ozman blocked the doorway. “You can’t leave now.”

There was a noticeable calm from the stereo as the CD ended the intensity of the machinegun trance. Within a few seconds, the next disc played. The Beach Boys *Pet Sounds* - Kumi’s for when she had just smoked, to kickstart happiness. With the first song - “Wouldn’t It Be Nice?” - Kent was buoyed by the cheerful sounds and the *shabu* bubbling in his blood. *Wouldn’t it be nice*, he thought, appropriate to nothing but a sense of elsewhere.

“This isn’t funny.” Monique struggled to break free of Ozman’s grip.

Kent recognized the fear that had surfaced in Monique. Ozman had a gift for instilling terror. Terror was not knowing what and when something might happen, but knowing it would happen.

“You’re gonna take his side? I’m the one who loves you. Don’t you see that? You think this asshole was gonna love you? Look, he’s pissed his fucking pants.”

Kent hadn’t wet his pants at all, but blood and sweat had soaked into his dark Armani slacks. The very sight of the expensive pants reminded Kent of what he and Kumi had talked of recently - getting out. His career was waning. He thought the press and his public might see their escape as getting out while he was ahead. Kent and Kumi talked of taking their money and running off to a little pad in Southeast Asia. He had found the perfect spot on a quiet island in the Gulf of Thailand. There, they could live for years on the money they had saved in two years - not much considering how much came in and simultaneously went out, but enough for that sort of life. Get out while the getting

was good. Leave *shabu* and schedules and all the shit they had accumulated in just three years for white sand and a hut made of palm fronds.

The room popped into noise, and then Kent did wet his pants. Stillness and silence followed the blast, and the air filled with the smell of cordite. Monique lay in a growing puddle of her own blood, a dark red sheen of it across the granite floor. She had made a dash for the door, shoving Ozman aside. In doing so, the gun in Ozman's hand had gone off, the 9mm round splintering Monique's jaw from below and exiting through her left cheek. Ozman stared at the gun like a man betrayed, tossed it to the floor and bent to Monique, who lay on her stomach, blood pouring from the wound to her face like drink from an upended bottle. As he leaned over his wife, Ozman slipped and landed on his back in a puddle of Monique's blood. Kent recovered the 9mm and waved it at Ozman with a new sense of hope for this day's game.

"Oh shit." Ozman looked up at Kent with a grim smile. "I killed her."

When the police arrived, they found Monique alive but in shock. Ozman lay dead beside his girlfriend, the 9mm in his hand, a bullet through his mouth and out the back of his head. The police found Kent and Kumi in each other's arms, a mess of blood, piss, and duct tape. "Caroline No", the last song on Pet Sounds, played on the stereo.

-Shockalicious!-

Their new celebrity did wonders for their careers, as they became national icons of courage - *KENT & KUMI SURVIVE NIGHT OF TERROR: Shock Comic Takes Hostages*. Kent and Kumi told the story of their capture and deliverance via Ozman's suicide at least a dozen times to television and print news all across Asia, and four times to a Tokyo detective who, while skeptical, closed the case within a week as an "attempted murder/suicide." The stricken faces of the brave pair leaving their building in front of police were shown next to a variety of old stills of Ozman with his mouth open in a trademark howl and an unflattering passport photo of a dour Monique. She was, after all, the villain in all of this, the temptress who had nearly ruined two marriages. Ozman was the kind of hero the Japanese could understand, crazy with love and a need for vengeance. Kent was blameless, a victim of the blond bitch's spells. When Kent returned to The Strange Bonanza, the audience received him with frenzied applause. He was no longer the *gaijin-tarento*; he was one of them, permanently pasted into their oversized scrapbook of tragedy. Kumi, too, was newly welcomed, joining Estée Lauder as their Asian rep.

Of Monique little was written or spoken. She returned to Montreal, where she faced a year of reconstructive surgery, agonizing rehabilitation, and a modeling career in as many pieces as her jaw. She slipped into the refuge of anonymity, her story untold.

Ozman was air-freighted back to Perth and buried in a family plot. In Japan, however, fans had determined that this was either another of Ozman's shockwaves, as they had taken to calling his outrageous stunts, or some sort of grand finale. Instead of a needle through his cheeks, he had put a bullet through his brain. "Shockalicious!" hailed

the Tokyo Journal. “Mohawk with a Bullet,” wrote Wired. “Cock of the Shock,” proclaimed Robot Monkey. Reports of Ozman-sightings began to pop up on Internet fan sites, and blogs scrolled with theories of the Australian’s imminent return. T-shirts with Ozman’s face in an open-mouth assault were sold in the Koenji Flea Market. One read: Brain Salad Surgery, another: Use the Illusion, yet another: Like a Hole in My Head.

New legions of shock comics began to appear regularly on variety shows. One ambitious young Japanese tried to run a coat hanger in and back out both sides of his nose on live television but put himself in a wheelchair, his basic motor skills gone. When the thin wire hit his brain, the amateur comic fell to the stage floor, flopping around like a fish. The audience went wild with laughter.

Christopher Bundy’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Glimmer Train Stories, The Main Street Rag, The Rambler, The Dos Passos Review, The Pedestal, and others. His work also appears in the anthology Stars Fell (Fall 2008), from Hub City, and others.