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'A sore in the neighbourhood'

Accused bicycle thief granted bail; Cyclists packed the courtroom for a closer look at the enigma that is Igor Kenk

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TORONTO -Igor Kenk has a messianic aura to accompany his horror novel name. He is a head taller than the guard who led him, handcuffed behind his back, into the glass prisoner's box in courtroom M2 at Old City Hall for his bail hearing this week. With his mane of tousled dirty-blond hair curling over the upturned collar of his orange prison overalls, his beard and drooping moustache, he resembles Liam Neeson from Star Wars: The Phantom Menace, crossed with Jesus Christ.

Mr. Kenk, 49, has kept Toronto at rapt attention for two weeks, as police executed 16 search warrants on his Queen Street West shop, his home in tony Yorkville, and a series of garages he rented in the west part of downtown.

And this week, journalists and bike activists packed the courtroom for a glimpse of him. He stared impassively through half-open eyes in a hangdog face as a Crown attorney read out 58 charges of possession of property obtained by crime and possession of drugs (cocaine, marijuana and crack cocaine). Then he took the stand for about two hours over two days, offering long, rambling answers to straightforward questions, all in a colourful English weighted by the accent of his native Slovenia.

Yesterday, a judge granted him \$275,000 bail. Asked by reporters what his plans were now, he said simply: "I'm a dead man."

A publication ban prevents media from reporting what Mr. Kenk told the court. But given that police have displayed 2,850 bicycles they say they found at addresses Mr. Kenk rented or owned, most people wonder: Is he nuts? "It seems like he's this weird kind of pack rat," says Marsh Thornley, who commutes by bike to his job at a branding company, and who lost a True North bike to theft two years ago.

"I want him to get looked at," said Detective Constable Aaron Dennis, the lead investigator, from the major crimes unit at Toronto Police's 14 Division. "There's obviously something wrong." But Constable James Rowe, who arrested Mr. Kenk on July 16, says the man is cogent and focused.

"He's all there," Const. Rowe says. "You can't charge him under the Mental Health Act."

So what drove Mr. Kenk? Det. Const. Dennis says Mr. Kenk told him "the apocalypse is coming." In the future when we have run out of oil, we will all need bikes to get around, the logic goes, and Mr.

Kenk will have a few in storage to offer us.

There's just one problem with this grand plan. Toronto cyclists love their bikes, and want to ride them right now. Leaving aside the mind of Igor Kenk, local cyclists ponder two other questions. (1) Where's my bike? (2) Why did it take police so long to act on all these bike thefts, no matter who was behind them?

When thieves stole my Raleigh mountain bike from my backyard five years ago, I went straight to The Bike Clinic, 927 Queen Street W., to look for it. But as soon as I entered the dark, cluttered cave of the shop, Mr. Kenk-- sitting with his pit bull on the sidewalk, surrounded by bikes and bike parts --ordered me out.

Many told me they have had the same experience.

"A lot of people are coming in and telling stories," says Nathalie Ethier, who works at Clafouti, the French bakery a few doors down from Mr. Kenk's shop. She herself has had two bikes stolen in the past few years, one of them on this block; Mr. Kenk chased her from his shop when she went to look, she said. "He was just a sore in the neighbourhood. Compared to the rest of the area, he's the dark spot."

This week, a chalkboard on the sidewalk in front of Clafouti asks wryly, "Where's Igor?" Chalk graffiti on Mr. Kenk's shop reads, "Centre for Poor Karma and Pain Research."

On Wednesday, I joined thousands of locals down at Strachan and Ordnance streets. In the police's old fleet garage and an unused factory across the street, police have lined up thousands of seized bicycles, resting on their handlebars and seat, with their wheels in the air. They are arranged alphabetically by brand: from Cannondale and CCM through Glider and Giant; Kona, Klein and Peugeot; Supercycle, Specialized and Schwinn, to Winchester and Wheeler.

Wendy Tancock, a designer who lost her own bike several years ago at Gore Vale St. and Queen St. W., just a block from Mr. Kenk's shop, describes the scene: "It is surreal, seeing that sea of bikes," she says. "Sort of like being at the dog pound and all the dogs are waiting for an owner, saying, 'Take me, take me!'"

Tara Norton, 36, a triathlete who competes in Ironman races and coaches other athletes, also got closure. Five years ago, Ms. Norton used a Kryptonite lock to secure her purple Rocky Mountain Fusion, worth about \$2,000, to her physiotherapist's fence on Gloucester Street. A thief stole it in daylight. She reported the theft, but never got the bike back. This week, she went down to the warehouse.

Among three purple Rocky Mountain Fusions, "I went, Oooh! That looks like my bike! I found my baby," she says. She did not have the serial number, but police found her theft report and she swore on a bible that the bike was hers. The pedals, wheels and chain were gone, but she found two correct-size wheels from a room full of wheels (also seized from Mr. Kenk's caverns) in an adjacent garage, put the bike in her trunk and drove home.

"I just did Ironman in Zurich," she says. "Everyone there leaves their bikes unlocked. I think we should be able to be like that."

When she spotted her bike, "It was one of those happy-sad moments. It was all rusted out and not treated properly. It wasn't worth taking home. But it was a sense of closure."

Police allege for years that Mr. Kenk's was a good place to find hot bikes; he even taunted authorities in a newspaper interview about a week before his arrest, suggesting he was untouchable.

Outside court this week, Det.-Const. Dennis said that he's spoken to Mr. Kenk, "50 or 100 times," over the years. "I've recovered stolen bikes from him before," he says. So why did it take the police so long

to actually arrest him? Superintendent Ruth White, who led the investigation of Mr. Kenk at 14 Division, said police focus first on more serious crimes, such as rape, murder, assault and break-ins. People don't register their bikes, don't file police reports when they're stolen, she adds.

"A lot of people, instead of calling and saying, 'That's my bicycle,' would just pay Igor \$30 and take their bike back," she says.

In the end, Mr. Kenk got busted by a cop on a bicycle who wasn't even looking for him. He is Const. Rowe -- an

affable officer in a blond buzz cut, whom I met at the mass stolen-bike display.

"We were in plainclothes that afternoon, just on our way to another bike-bait location," he recalls. (Baiting means leaving a bike out for a thief to steal, and then arresting the thief.) He says he witnessed Mr. Kenk instructing an accomplice to cut a bike with bolt-cutters next to the shop, and bring it to Mr. Kenk. When the accomplice, whom police say is Jean Leveau, began to steal a second bike, police moved in and arrested both men.

Toronto police work eight days on and six days off. After Mr. Rowe locked up Mr. Kenk, he left for his six days off.

From home, he heard about the further searches and tips to Crime Stoppers, leading to the discovery of hundreds and then thousands of bicycles.

"I was so glad I wasn't there," he says. "These guys had to empty the garages, and in this heat? And they took them all over to the police garage on Hanna, and they ran out of room so they had to put them all in the truck and bring them over here. When I got back on shift they said, 'You better watch your car, Rowe.' I'm gonna owe those guys some cold drinks at some point."

Supt. White says processing all the bikes has become a logistical nightmare. The police rented four Ryder trucks, and used 90 "youth in policing" -- youth aged 15 to 19, from "at-risk" areas of town, who have summer jobs with police-- to help sort the bikes. To feed the youth, she said, cost \$1,500.

"The budget is shot," she says.

Perhaps the scope of this bike-bust will encourage police to keep a tighter lid on suspected bike thieves going forward; they don't want to go through this again.

Even as cyclists are getting their bikes back, though, some are feeling vengeful.

"We can't hang horse thieves anymore, so we want to see how the process works," says the artist Amazon, when I met her outside Mr. Kenk's bail hearing. A bike builder, she rode here on one of her beauties, with chopper forks and a frame covered in fake zebra fur. "Now that Igor's in jail, you see all the crackheads circling around Igor's shop and scurrying away. Everyone used to see his truck driving around, full of bikes."

The story has riveted Toronto. "We knocked three homicides off the front page because everyone can relate to having their bike stolen," says Supt. White. "The pain is personal."

Ms. Tancock, the designer, who struck a nerve last year with her "Free Conrad" T-shirts, is seeking to capture that mood with a new shirt, featuring a bicycle, a heart and the lyrics: "Reunited -- and it feels so good."

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