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The strange allure of the 'bike guy'

Queen West shop was my kind of place

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The first time I met Igor Kenk, he was gripping a wrench beside a pile of pit bull puppies. It was five or six years ago and my bike had just ejected me on to the street. It could have been due to the faulty chain or the sudden flat tire. Either way, I was in need of a Band-Aid and my bike a wrench.

Kenk's joint resembled the Bovine Sex Club, a bar with an equally sinister exterior. Mangled cycle parts perilously sprung from The Bicycle Clinic's facade, and hokey messages were taped to the dirty window. No cashier, no sign stating it was a business, just an unpretentious cottage industry on Queen West: my kind of shop.

I thrust my vintage wheels on to the sidewalk, where Kenk always conducted business, and waited my turn. I petted the puppies and the friendly mother (Kenk's a dog lover) and watched. Even then, he had a powerful presence. Like most scene-stealers whose magnetism arises from their character, he wasn't much to look at: stringy hair, saggy money belt, a mechanic's dirty nails.

But he had excellent blue eyes, was energetic, very male and thus attractive. When he spoke, his prophetic gaze never wavered; his bewitching eyes felt as though they could cleave into my mind. He would be difficult to lie to, and gifted at manipulating others. I could just tell.

He reminded me of the deceased white supremacist Wolfgang Droege whom I had more than one long conversation with. (I'm wholeheartedly not suggesting Kenk shared Droege's foul ideology, just pointing out the intensity of their presences.)

So what was Kenk into? I'm not really sure. Whenever I passed by on foot or bike, he seemed to be holding court among a coterie of hangers-on. Sometimes he played with the puppies in front of the shop or across the street at Trinity Bellwoods. And more than once I saw him crazily whip up the street to test a bike he planned to buy or had fixed. Who could tell?

I don't know what Kenk whispered to the guy on the sidewalk when I wheeled my broken bike up to the curb, but the pair stopped talking.

"Nice bike," he said. "You've got serial number?"

Not, "Do you have a serial number?" but, "You've got serial number?" He sounded like

Baryshnikov.

I told him I didn't and he thrust his hand into the pouch he always wore and ripped the cardboard off of a pack of gum. He wrote down the information; his handwriting looked like my Bulgarian grandmother's. (It's been years, but for some reason I haven't thrown out that paper.)

"There are many thieves in this city. Without serial number, that's it. Fzzzt," he said, swiping his arm.

He took my bike inside and said to come back tomorrow.

We then talked about dogs and he said something about loving pit bulls because they were misunderstood, the underdog of the dog world. I agreed with him.

Apparently, Igor (before the arrest, he was known only by his first name) had an unscrupulous reputation. When I told friends my beloved basket bike was at his place, they said I'd never see it again.

I came back the next day and the shop was locked. I dialed the number on the door and Kenk appeared from upstairs. He produced my bike and I paid him and rode off.

Over the years, I'd take it in for a tune-up. To me he was an eccentric character who had lots to say on so many subjects -- art, life, whatever -- that I'd catch snippets of. He never used my name. No matter, he was just the guy who fixed my bike. I suppose everyone has his or her own story about Igor Kenk. This is mine.

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