

The Hundred-Yen Singer



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1 The Million-Yen Towels

Seems my ship is always on the verge of sinking.

Am I just too nice, or is it all my parents' fault? Or maybe this sequinned tutu is just too, too tacky and cheap. Whatever the reason, I always seem to be steering with a warped tiller.

'A talented person like you . . .' they say, but they don't give me a job. That's why I can always affect the air of an outsider.

Love is a miracle, Love, love, love It's a miracle

On no, not again. Those annoyingly familiar voices echo around the hall. Once that cheap little melody gets into your ear it'll stick there like a piece of gum stuck to the sole of your shoe.

Today my glorious showbiz career has taken me to a health spa in East Omiya, a dormitory town north of Tokyo. The two unlovely voices now filling the concert hall belong to Kenjiro and David, a singing-and-dancing duo who happen to work for the same little talent agency as me. Billed as the 'Duo That Crosses Borders', these two 24-year-olds are supposed to be a Japanese-American combo. Actually, the publicity pack is a pack of lies. The allegedly American David is an illegal Filipino immigrant who's bleached his hair blond. Kenjiro is, admittedly, a genuine Japanese, but the bit about him having graduated from Harvard University is a bit

of a laugh, at least to those such as myself who've known him since his days pimping in Uguisudani.

Fly to me (my love!)
Fly to my arms (uh-huh!),
Your perfume (0000h!)
Is so lovely (uh-huh).

Uh-huh.

I really hate that song. Every time they do it, it feels like the air is full of poisonous flying insects. The insects seem to come crawling out of my ears, my mouth, across the nape of my neck, and they start dancing all over my body. I really can't stand it.

'Yeeeeaaaaayyyyy!'
'Go for it, Ken-chan.'

Faces flushed from the hot baths from which they've just emerged, a herd of excited housewives stampede on to the stage. It's a broad stage, made of eighty tatami mats, and now it is swarming with pink muu-muus – the Hawaiian-style bathrobes favoured by health spas – as a hundred drunken elderly ladies surround the two idols.

Is it yes or is it no?
Is it a little kiss for me?
Don't want one today (not today!),
I want you right now!
(Ah, do the hustle!)
Uh-huh, you know what I mean.
Uh-huh, love is a miracle.

I don't need to look at the stage to know what they are doing right now—it's the battle of the backsides. Every time one of them goes 'uh-huh' they wiggle their butts at each other five times. I've seen them practising it loads of times down at the agency office, in front of a video of the deeply revered John Travolta. Their enthusiasm is so moving that it's hard to keep a straight face.

What the hell am I doing in a weird place like this? Time and again I long to be shot of the whole scene; time and again I have to admit that right now this seems to be the only way I can make a living. In this way my thoughts mentally chase their tails around and around the tree.

Just a few months have passed since I started my new life as

Rinka Kazuki of Kink Records, a fictitious label invented by my agency in the hope that people would confuse it with the considerably better-known King Records. Before that I was a 'companion' at a sort of hostess club in the entertainment quarter of Uguisudani. I was doing OK until one day I went and fell in love with one of the customers, and after that I couldn't really concentrate on pampering the rest of the clientele. With a weakness like that you can see I wouldn't have been suited to office work.

Kenjiro, who was pimping at the same establishment, was concerned. The guy I'd fallen for was nicknamed 'the Emperor of West Kawaguchi Nightlife'. He was a notorious playboy in that part of the unfashionable Saitama Prefecture.

'This is the first time it's ever taken me three whole days to bed a woman,' he charmingly remarked as he stooped through the hotel door. But when he emerged from that door a few hours later the casual wisecracking humour was gone.

Uh-oh, here we go again.

I had an idea what it would be like from past experience. This was going to be another monumental hassle in my life – and I had willingly brought it upon myself. How many times had I messed up my life and had to start again from scratch? Couldn't I get the messy business of love sorted out a little more smoothly this time?

After that he swiftly did the rounds of my other customers, beating up each one in turn to warn him away, and it wasn't long before his shirts and mine were swaying in the breeze together on the veranda of a new flat.

Naturally, he wouldn't stand for me taking any more jobs as hostess. 'On the other hand,' said Kenjiro, 'even he would probably let you do a bit of singing. I've had enough of the pimping myself. Come on Rinka, let's hit the entertainment circuit.'

However, the agency that Kenjiro introduced me to took a huge chunk out of our wages, and, although we did indeed hit an entertainment circuit of sorts, most of the stops along the way were far out in the sticks – places like East Omiya. And so, today, as ever, I prepare to take to the stage with a troubled heart.

'So, you would, would you? Well, take that.'

The dressing-room rang with the slap of playing-cards on greasy old tatami mats. The matinée was over, and Kenjiro and his fake American partner David were gambling their entire day's

pay at poker – as was their wont. Today the MC was taking the pair of them to the cleaners.

'Oh, good grief - lost again. We're broke, David. Even if we chuck in yesterday's pay as well we can't cover this one.'

'What you say?' David looked up at Kenjiro with his meek, weak eyes.

'Call the agency and ask if we can have an advance on next month's pay. I'm just totally broke.'

'All right, Ken-chan.'

'It's Ken-san to you, arsehole.'

'Ken-san.'

Poor David was trapped by his illegal status. Knowing that Kenjiro could shop him to the immigration at any time, it made him fawningly obedient to Kenjiro's every word. Eyes brimming with tears, he picked up the mobile.

I had finished changing at last, and now I appeared before them, all decked out in my pink-sequined Chinese dress.

'Rinka? Wow, get a load of that slit skirt.'

'Hee-hee. Kind of sexy, Ken-chan?'

'Stop preening. It's no good trying to turn me on. I've got no money to give you a tip.'

At the word tip, Kenjiro suddenly remembered something. 'Tips? Tips? Of course!' he muttered to himself.

'I can pay up today after all – with this! I'd completely forgotten. Stand back, everybody. Way-hay-hay!'

He got up and briskly yanked down his flies, for all the world as if he were about to piss on the floor. I gave a little ladylike shriek.

It wasn't a pretty sight. Vigorously shaking his pelvis, a motion mastered over many renditions of the 'uh-huh' song, Kenjiro was shaking crumpled thousand-yen notes out of his trousers like a conjurer drawing strings of coloured handkerchiefs from a top hat. They had been put there by lusty old grannies as a tribute to his hip-wiggling skills in the show.

'Those randy old bitches! They were stuffing cash right into my underpants.'

As we observed the unsavoury spectacle, we noticed even a few brown ten-thousand-yen notes mixed in with the blue thousands.

'Go on, count 'em,' said Kenjiro, pointing his jaw at the pile of crumpled notes with a disdain unusual in one who has just been hammered at blackjack.

'The entire contents of your undies, for me? Eh-heh-heh.' The man with the tinny laugh and the silly high-pitched voice

was Moody Konami. He was no taller than a schoolboy in shorts and had a baby face to match, although he'd never see fifty again. He was a famous MC, yet with his double-breasted blue suit and black bow-tie, his pomade-encrusted hair parted conservatively at the side, he had the somehow disconcerting presence of a ventriloquist's dummy.

In his youth he'd parlayed his cheeky-chappie look into quite a successful stage career. Naming himself Pretty Konami, he'd found a niche telling comic stories while strumming along on a little guitar and had been a big hit with the older ladies. But on his fortieth birthday he changed his stage name from Pretty to Moody. This proved a disastrous career move. His popularity went down the tubes; the occasional television engagements he'd been getting evaporated, and in no time at all he was reduced to being a camp MC, introducing third-rate touring acts at hot-spring resorts.

There, at least, he remained hugely popular. They loved his baby face etched all over with wrinkles: the incongruity of it made him look like a child impersonating an old man in a school play. Until he minced across the stage, cracking his old jokes in that squeaky voice of his, you just didn't feel that the show had properly begun. He was as essential a part of the hot-spring experience as the wooden buckets that the customers used to throw water over themselves before taking to the baths. He embodied the pleasures of the cheap weekend break for the plebs.

'All right. Shall we make a start then, Rinka?' Today's show was in two parts. Part One was Kenjiro and David with their pop songs and bum-wiggling, then there was a break while the customers played bingo, and then it was time for Part 2: Rinka Kazuki, with 'The Essence of Enka'.

'Full house for you today, Rinka.' Moody's words sent a luscious shiver slithering up my spine, from the small of my back to the top of my neck. It's always been like that for me. The moment you put me in front of an audience every single cell in my body seems to vibrate minutely with some strange new energy: my voice, my expressions, my hand and foot movements, the clothes, agonized over and donned with such painstaking care, the songs I had prepared for this show, everything is going to be observed by a crowd of people I don't know. Each and every one of their lives is about to take a little detour to visit Rinka Kazuki. Ah, the mystery of it, the sheer random chance of it. At times like these I feel at last that, after all, I am a person of some consequence: my hair, my fingers,

every flutter of the eyelashes, every breath I take, all, at last, are of some value.

And so, even the stage at a little provincial health spa such as this is an important place for me: a place to refresh my life and my soul. Showbiz people often say that once you've been bathed in the spotlight you can never escape from it. They speak the truth. Once caught in the sparkling waters of that bright white space you can never live on land again. It feels so good to swim in those spotlit waters that life back on terra firma is stifling: you thrash and flail around, gasping for the water like a fish that has accidentally leapt out of the aquarium. I guess I don't have skin on me any more but tight-meshed, silver, showbiz fish-scales. Same with Kenjiro, same with David – covered in smooth, cold scales.

They're right to call these places health spas. The old folks come here to enjoy soaking in the restorative waters of the baths, and we showbiz folk come to refresh our scaly bodies by soaking them in the healing waters of the limelight.

Today's venue is typical. It's a spacious building with an appallingly punning name – the I Love Yu (yu meaning hot water in Japanese) – and a whole range of facilities besides the baths and the big tatami room for enjoying the show. It has a video-game arcade and a noodle restaurant, a shopping area with various health products, a boutique, a shop selling cultured-pearl necklaces and a fortune-telling corner – all sorts of seemingly unrelated services, all brought together by some kind of health-spa logic.

The corridor leading to the baths is festooned, as in all these places, with posters advertising stars of the stage that no one has ever seen or heard of:

The man they call the Yujiro Ishihara of the Heisei Era!

The Mystery Man of Tottori

HIROSHI YUMEKAWA!

His hit single

'The Freezing-Cold Blues'

Now on sale!

Heading for the hit parade with a heart on fire . . . it's SHIMAKO SADO

Taking her show across the nation to meet the fans with her hot new release 'The Rain Keeps Falling on Your Head'!

Even Kenjiro and his sidekick were up there:

We just can't wait!
The duo that crosses national borders is here at last!
Their names? KENJIRO AND DAVID
Their song? 'Love Is a Miracle'
Now selling like hotcakes!!

Kenjiro actually looked pretty good in the publicity poster. The tanned skin made him look kind of wild, and he gazed out at the spectator through long, cool, half-hooded eyes. I guess he would pass as a good-looking guy in most people's books, except for the snaggle teeth that would stick out in all directions if, in an absent-minded moment, he allowed himself to laugh – that and the coarse expression of his face in repose. It was the face of a man whose conversational range was limited to money talk and toilet humour.

Then again, I sometimes think that maybe the old trouts who come to the shows at the health spas and hot springs actually like that glimpse of low vulgarity that shines through Kenjiro's suave façade. As the gilt peels off this gaudy statue of manhood, it may look utterly pathetic to you and me, but to the drunken housewives the process of decay releases a scent of raw pheromone that ignites their animal desires.

Major-league singers have an aura about them. They seem real enough for you to touch them, yet they remain tantalizingly out of reach. But with cheap, minor-league singers, the promoters really have to buff that shiny image like crazy or the punters will get the feeling that if they only stuck their hands out a little bit further they could in fact grab hold quite easily. So it is with Kenjiro and David, and, although I hate to admit it, I guess it's the same with me. You know, there's this thing we often say when we're having a laugh at our own expense, 'Anyway, we're only hundred-yen singers.' And what's wrong with being cheap? Think of the pleasure you get from the sight of those cheap goods all lined up on the shelves of a hundredyen shop. The sparkle in the eyes of the ordinary folk when they gaze upon those goods is brighter than any you'll see from them in a luxury boutique. Cheap and cheerful; posh and expensive: like vin and vang, there's a place for both in this world of ours - or so say I, speaking as a hundred-yen singer myself.

Sorry she's so cute – she just can't help it! Introducing the chirruping palm-sized little songbird, the pride of Kink Records RINKA KAZUKI

The kid from Kyushu with ballads in her blood!

So here I am, standing behind the stage curtain, trying to calm down my galloping heartbeat, staring fixedly at the bit of velvet hanging right in front of my eyes. And as I stare at it, I notice that someone with a felt-tip pen has drawn a little spot on the inside of the curtain, right at eye-level. No doubt some other struggling artiste put it there in a desperate attempt to keep herself sane.

Because, you know, it's hard to keep staring and staring at that blank piece of cloth, like you're about to shoot an arrow at it; hard for me, hard for Kenjiro, hard for all the magicians and dancing girls and stand-up comedians – all the two-a-penny acts that strut and fret their hour upon this stage. No doubt they all stand here behind this blank piece of velvet with the same feelings chasing each other through their breasts. That eye-level patch must have been stared at so hard over the years by the different performers who stand behind it, day after day, year after year, that I bet it's getting frayed down to the threads. A little more staring and you'd be able to see right through it.

'Ladies and gentlemen, live on stage for your diversion and delight, the top recording artiste from Kink Records, Rinka Kazuki!' Moody Konami's high-pitched voice ushered me on to the stage, generously muffling the second K in Kink Records to make it sound more like King.

'By way of introduction, ladies and gentlemen, Rinka will sing for us "Ballad of the Man of Kawachi". Give her a big hand now.'

Up goes the curtain. The old codgers in the audience go 'Oooh' at the sight of my sexy Chinese dress with the thigh-length slit. The audience starts to pay attention. Through a buzz of background noise the scratchy old tape strikes up with the hackneyed intro to the first song. No place to run, no place to hide, the fake enka singer with the fake smile plastered all over her face is revealed to her audience, arms outstretched in greeting to all.

The likes of us have no fame and no popularity. All we have is our lust for the limelight and our debts. We risk our lives clinging to a ferry that's riddled with holes and liable to sink at any moment. The sea may rage and the waves climb high, but there's no way off the boat. We cannot – we must not – live respectable

lives, so there's a desperation about us as we stumble through life.

'Enyakorase no dokkoise! One, two, three, four . . .'

Enka are traditional-style Japanese ballads, so it's kind of customary to shout things like that out before launching into the song itself. All that dokkoise stuff doesn't mean anything; it's just to establish the mood. But why, I hear you ask, am I standing here in a sexy *Chinese* dress, trying to sing an old-fashioned *Japanese* ballad? Is there not something a trifle inappropriate in the combination? Banish such doubts, gentle reader, for there is no room for them in the world of enka. Clothes are clothes; songs are songs. Clothes, songs, moves, you just try and give 'em the best you've got in every department, pack in as much value for money as you can and never mind the finer points of coordination. That is how you survive in this business.

Wobbling precariously in my five-inch heels, I belt out the rhythmic chanting in the instrumental interludes of the Kawachi ballad. I stamp my feet, I shake my head, and a shower of hairpins and ornaments comes tumbling out of my carefully pinned-up coiffure and scatters all over the floor. Never mind. Keep smiling.

'You're a bit of all right, love.' One of the old codgers has got over-excited and he rises from the audience to come clambering on to the stage. He reckons he's going to dance with me. Moody Konami comes skipping adroitly out from the wings and hauls him away. But while he's busy doing that, another one comes dancing unsteadily up to the stage, and then another. They're peering into my face while I'm trying to sing; they're leering at me with their toothless old mouths hanging open.

'Tsk, tsk.' Clucking sanctimoniously, Moody comes scurrying up to clear them away. I give him a disapproving frown. Hey – this is a danceable number, and it's only natural if people feel their bodies starting to move. Personally I'm glad they're getting into it.

It's going to be easier than usual to get them going today. Good old Kenjiro and David. They've warmed the crowd up nicely with their 'uh-huh' routine. This is going to be a breeze.

It's not always like this. Often when I come on the atmosphere's chilly enough to see your breath. After all, not one of the people in the audience is actually there for the purpose of listening to an obscure singer called Rinka Kazuki. They just happen to have shown up on a day when it's my turn to be the entertainment. Naturally they still nourish faint hopes of enjoying the show, but,

unless you hit them really hard with something to grab their attention, the moment their eyes focus on you you'll lose them and the show will carry right on in the same awkward silence. Believe me, there is nothing more miserable than singing in that Siberian cold with the regulation smile all over your face. At such times the awareness of being third rate swells ever stronger, until you're plunged into a bottomless pit of despair.

Even then, however, the situation can be retrieved. You give them a bit of patter – talk about your home town, or the pleasures of the season, how nice the cherry blossoms are this year, or whatever. That's the way to get to their softer side, and when you sing the next number you notice a distinct warming of the atmosphere.

Here at the I Love Yu the atmosphere was plenty warm enough. Take a pan of water, add chopped vegetables, bring rapidly to simmering point – the vegetables will boil to a mushy consistency. Here in the auditorium of the health spa we had reached simmering point. The atmosphere was steaming hot and the customers' emotions had come to a mushy consistency. With the slightest gesture of hand or leg, I could make them laugh, cry or get seriously over-excited.

This, of course, is pay-off time, the moment when you really rake in the tips. I have no idea where the custom came from, but they always shove the money at you held between disposable chopsticks. Since the agency ruthlessly rips off our appearance fees, we hundred-yen singers depend on our tips to achieve a basic standard of living. We'd get nowhere if we had to depend on the peanuts passed on to us by the agency. Two shows in a day, and all you get is 18,000 yen – it's ridiculous. The agency's getting somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 yen and pocketing the difference. And since they only find work for you maybe four or five days in a month – well, there's no way you can live on that.

My salary from the agency last month was just 90,000 yen. But in five shows – two performances each – I made about 150,000 yen in tips. Altogether I made just about enough to scrape by in Tokyo, the world's most expensive city. And I'm doing OK for tips today. I've got thousand-yen notes slipped into the front of my dress and folded around my fingers as they grip the mike. When you do cabarets you sometimes get 10,000-yen notes as well, but you can't expect that kind of treatment at the baths. Still, I am overwhelmed with gratitude at these old folks proffering their crumpled old notes. No way will I use this money on boring