

Project Tokyo

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A tired LA talent agent escapes client abuse and seeks solace abroad in Japan.

I was walking around the Hollywood Farmers Market one Sunday in July when I went into an alley to sit down and smoke a joint. A tall, gym-toned, light-skinned black man, in an orange tank top and khaki shorts sat down next to me. "Can I get a drag?" he asked. I gave him my smoke and watched him suck: high cheekbones, full lips, wide open eyes.

He looked down at his phone and started playing a video. It was his Instagram. "WB11. Model, actor, but more a performer than anything," he said.

I told him that I was a talent manager, but in truth, I was really a failed actor who came from Boston 20 years ago, never getting hired, paid or laid.

"Do you know Matan Sharon?" I asked him. That was my highest performing client.

"Is she somebody big?" he asked.

"Matan is a man. Yes. He's doing well. He's on CBS's *The Big Noodle*," I said.

He took another drag, stood up and thanked me again. I never thought I would see him again.

Then it was late October- dried leaves, paper goblins taped to windows, an extra blanket at night.

Alone, after a Woody Allen movie at the Arclight, I walked into the lobby and saw WB11.

His shiny black hair fell in waves on the back of his head. He carried himself in cocky ease, his long eyelashes slightly effeminizing, his broad shoulders and muscled arms disarmingly manly. He smelled like lime and tobacco.

“WB11! How ya doin?” I asked as if he were my best friend. I patted him the on the back, reminded him of the shared joint, congratulated him on Instagram, invited him to get coffee.

“Man, I would but I am waiting for my girl. You know *YoungDoll?*”

“Young Doll?” I asked. “Is she someone I should know?”

“Yeah. She’s the one I posted the video dancing with Rachel the Sriracha Lady at Spice Alley!”

I could only remember him.....in still images, his blue eyes and peanut butter complexion, his carved and chiseled body, his shirtless hikes atop Runyon Canyon. Everything concerning his face and body was in my mind, and I forgot anyone else connected to him.

“I’m an agent,” I blurted out, a line that functions as a stun gun to disable frantic and fast-moving narcissists.

“I’m 37. You know I was a model for 15 years and I want to transition to acting. Everyone thinks I’m 26,” he said.

“Do you want to sit down and talk?” I asked.

“Sure. Let’s go over to the restaurant and grab a beer,” he said. His previous appointment was forgotten, as quickly as a mosquito flies and lands on its next arm.

We sat down and ordered two ales. I drank mine fast as he ran down his bio. Born in Milwaukee, mom was German, dad was African-American, dropped out of Northern Illinois to model in New York, lived and in NYC for ten years, moved to Hollywood. Never acted, only modeled, had one son. “I’m really an actor,” he said.

I asked him if he studied acting. No.

Had he been on stage, in a theater group? No.

Was he a member of Actor’s Equity, AFTRA-SAG? No.

What writers or playwrights did he admire? None.

What movies or TV shows had he seen? He couldn’t recall any.

What books did he read? What productions had he auditioned for? What did he do all day with his time and in pursuit of his goals? He said he lived healthily and spiritually.

“What I really want to do Mario,” he said to me as he leaned over, “Is go to Japan. More than acting, more than modeling, more than money, I just dream of Japan.”

He spoke of his simple apartment, his barefoot walks atop freshly swept floors, his futon and white comforter on the floor, his burning Cedarwood incense, his daily drinks of green tea, his paper shaded lamps, his dinners of ramen and grilled salmon and noodles, his teenage forays into karate and judo.

He spoke angrily about LA. He hated trash on the street, loud neighbors, rude drivers, stolen bicycles, tagged walls, nightly sirens; helicopters cutting and slicing air, shining down beams of light that woke him up.

He described, in contrast, the peace he imagined in Japan, the civilization he knew existed over there. He was ready and willing to become an exile, to leave Los Angeles.

He licked his lips, dipped two fingers into his water and moistened his hair back. “I shower with Yuzu gel. I rub it into a sponge and then I put it all over my body. I turn the water up, nice and hot, and let it run all over. The suds go down the drain and the whole bathroom smells like grapefruit. I’m relaxed and rejuvenated.”

He told me about hanging copper rain chains from his fire escape and collecting the water in barrels as they do in Japan.

Ye shall know a man by his purchases.

Our curious session was over. He had asked no questions about me. We shook hands. And then, in the modern way, he leaned over, hugging and patting me in void intimacy.

I walked back through the blowing trash along Sunset, crossing Vine, and turned right on North El Centro, a winding, dark and atmospheric old street of worn down stucco apartments and cheap nostalgic sentiment, scented in jasmine and wan gloom.

Matan Sharon

Matan Sharon, my 27-year-old client, born in Israel, destroyed in Los Angeles, got a role on a CBS sitcom three years ago. He was well paid, and I skimmed 15% off and kept 85% of it in the bank and put 15% in the market.

Hollowed eyed, chain smoking, the most compelling young actor on television and the dullest in person, Matan was a manic depressive with wild mood swings and sudden fits of anger. He would tell me that I changed his life and made his dreams possible. And then he'd slam the phone down and say he hated my guts.

Matan introduced me to another actor, red-haired Dominique Mitterand, a Paris born model who came to Hollywood in 2009. She worked in a Silver Lake wine bar, and I signed her. Johnny Depp came into the shop to buy a case of wine, took her number, and within a week she was cast in a tentpole animated/live action squirrel movie eventually strung out into four sequels.

Larry Sheinbaum from Newton, MA was my childhood buddy. He dropped out of rabbinical school, moved to Hollywood, and created and produced "Little F-kn Bitches" a hit TV comedy show. When his son Mark graduated BU, I signed him and within six months Mark was the co-star of "Little F-kn Bastards", his father's new TV show. I took 20% off the top of Mark's salary and bought my parents a vacation home on Cape Cod.

In 2011, I was approached by Breakfast Plate Productions, Inc. and asked to come on as Executive Producer on a new reality show about people stranded in the Arctic who struggle to find hot breakfast in a sea of snow. Two months after I joined, I had a falling out with Martin Kampfer because I criticized his choice of shoes before an important meeting with executives.

I was making money.

Yet I was empty, so empty, so fed up, so tired, so utterly tired.

Sun Down Days

Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, the three holiest days in the American calendar, came and went, and again I found myself pushed into another 21st Century year. January, fresh, untested, unsullied, born free of blood, conflict or tears, came out of the womb of time, enveloping mankind as a tangible measurement of life's passing and eternity.

I sat at my desk under a skylight into which poured the mockingly happy sun that illuminates all of Los Angeles, daring a city to cry.

I opened the glass casement doors onto my balcony and walked into a living dead winter garden of white roses and pots of lavender, hummingbirds dancing above the electric water fountain, indestructible mossy green succulents, and preternaturally red geraniums from the Home Depot, grown in Supersoil, sold in six pack.

I had grown old.

Now I lived in the new land of online and passed from my late 30s into my early 50s watching a computer screen.

I thought of my old Italian grandmother, Martina, sitting at her window sill at 150 Salem Street in the North End of Boston, a smart, strong lady who raised six children and read one book in her life, chewing rhubarb candy, resting her meaty arm on a pillow surveying the street, every day, for many hours. "Look Mario they put a parking ticket on that car!"

Life is time passed mostly in looking out.

I could not sit and watch my street as nobody walked down it. Instead, I sat out on the balcony in the afternoon sun, resolute only in my will not to walk back inside.

I pulled out my telephone, as men once pulled out their cigarette; my security device, my reassurance, my prop to steady a life unsure of its next step.

Walter Benton had texted me: *Come to the Hollywood Farmer's Market at Spice Alley on Sunday at 11am.*

Sunday in Los Angeles

I ran on the treadmill Saturday night, ate a healthy dinner and went to bed at 11 O'Clock. I awoke at 7am, showered and cleaned the apartment, dusting the floors, bleaching the bathroom, washing my laundry and hanging up t-shirts to dry in the wind.

Something existential had bothered me the day before, but I had shaken it off the next morning. As an added insurance of happiness, I checked my Fidelity investment account and it had gained \$4,560 in the last three months.

I vowed to eat healthy. I opened a yogurt and poured granola into a bowl, mixing it with a banana and fresh strawberries.

I arrived at the market around 10:30 and made my way over to the landscaped brick alley where the city government and private enterprise startled the City of Angels with pavers, plantings and LED lighting. As I walked passed Velvet Margarita's patio, Matan sat and drank a frozen margarita with my other client Dominique.

I walked over to say hello. Matan smoked illegally and ignored me. Icy eyed Dominique looked over. Again I said hello.

"I heard you the first time!" Matan shouted. "Get the fuck out of our space Mario!"

"Don't you know we are sick of you?" Dominique yelled. "Sick of your bullshit, your self-centeredness, your uppity Hollywood attitude. We are eating alone and just want to be left alone!"

"Don't call me again Mario!" Matan screamed. "We're finished and we are getting the fuck out of your clutches! We're having a meeting to figure out how to destroy you!"

Between them both they had both earned almost \$10 million dollars in the last five years. I somehow, against all reason, had considered them friends. For years, I had fought for their successes, covered up their failures, made up excuses for their behaviors.

I walked up the alley shaking and humiliated. And then, I, still bruised, at the Hepps Salt Bar, saw Walter Benton with his phone, filming himself singing to the salt.

I came closer. He was unaware as I watched him dance a trance of mono-choreography.

"You see you just take a little of the spicy salt, the chipotle and sprinkle it on the avocado and then you chop, like this, the tomato, and you take your fork and you mash it around, like this, like this..."

His hips and legs swerved and his arms were akimbo. He sang and rapped *a capella*, lyrical and lithe, on his feet, his tight tank top and tanned arms performing for his smart phone. "Come to me, come to me salt, make me happy and give me pleasure!" It made me laugh and think of Harry Belafonte.

I had walked down that Hollywood alley, for only 10 minutes. But in that time I had passed through satisfaction, assault, degradation, rejection, humiliation and, now, finally, laughter.

"Hey, Walter! I'm here!" I said aloud, almost assuring myself as surely as I was alerting him. He kept dancing, looked over and nodded.

After he stopped, we went down the alley, sat on a stoop in the sun and smoked a joint. He had invited me, expressly and exclusively, for just this moment._

Christa McCarthy

After the actors' alley attack I needed to get away. Revenge of some sort, the subtlest kind, came into my head. I booked a Tokyo flight and hotel. Before my trip, I erected some talent to bolster my roster.

With Matan and Dominique plotting something evil, I hunkered down and met a very fat and homely 38-year-old comedian, Christa McCarthy, from Lawrence, MA. She had come by and cried about her bad luck and broken dreams. She grabbed my Bay State heart and I signed her.

Christa booked a recurring role on Fox's "87", a sci-fi series about zombies living in Palm Springs. Christa played a fitness instructor who worked undercover as a government agent. She eventually won an Emmy and her salary increased to \$500,000 an episode. I took 15% and invested most of it in Asian Mutual Funds.

When I called Christa to congratulate her on the Emmy, she burst out in tears and said, "You were the whole reason that I am who I am today! I really thank you from the bottom of my heart Mario!"

I was touched, and finally felt some measure of gratitude, appreciation and loyalty from one of my most successful clients.

A week later, I received a letter from Christa's attorney, Rita Kleinfelder, informing me that I was no longer representing her client.

To understand, comprehend or reason why is not for the Angeleno to know. Our city, like Baghdad or Damascus, is cursed by sudden and inexplicable explosions of fraternal disorder, irrational and cruel, inhuman and inane, permanent shearing of ties between lovers, friends and family. In their wake, the victims pick up the shards of love and memory and place them into an emotional suitcase, tied together with frayed string, shoved into the back seat on a journey riding the freeways and potholed streets over and over again. They drive until death, in search of some sure sign, safe exit and smooth pavement, accelerating in futility into eternity.

Hotel Celestine

The lady clerk bowed when I entered the elevator at Tokyo's Hotel Celestine. Silently, I glided up to my little white room overlooking the skyscrapers, a room entered into with a key card, a green light, a waiting pair of slippers, terry cloth bathrobe and the comforting hum of the Panasonic remote controlled air-conditioner.

I sat on the toilet, pushed a button and felt a spray of warm water shoot up into my anus. I walked into the shower and turned the perfectly tuned hot-cold faucet to 40 C. I worked a foamy menthol shower gel into my jet-fatigued body and stood under the spray for a good fifteen minutes.

I fell down on the bed and curled up under the blanket. I awoke at 3:30am and having nothing to do, decided to get up, wide-awake, put on my khakis, white t-shirt, blue sweater and go downstairs and walk out onto the dark and uninhabited streets of Minato.

Occasionally, at 4am, a taxi drove by. I walked passed a man sweeping an office lobby. But mostly the city was asleep. And I was alone, in an exquisitely safe landscape, without real danger, save for the one in my imagination.

I took a walk, a far walk, into the Ginza, where the lights on the stores and the buildings still burned brightly with energy, vitality, freedom, prosperity and pride.

Just before dawn, I reached Tsukiji Fish Market in the dark, busy as hell, with trucks, workers, and a flood of tourists inside. The air smelled marine, fishy and salty and smoked in diesel.

I entered one of the busy alleys, where boxes and men on wheels, pushing and driving, steering fish and fish parts, passed me in flashes. They hauled large and small cargoes of the sea, loading and unloading, stacking and uncrating oceanic produce: freshly killed, still swimming, captured and sold against their will.

I took out my Fujifilm camera and aimed it at two young guys in vinyl suits, joyfully riding past me in a yellow Komatsu Forklift. "Take more photos!" they exuberantly yelled in English.

A faint sun came over. I walked into a sushi stall, sat down and devoured a dish of fresh shrimp, mackerel, yellowtail, sea urchin, salmon roe; washed down with a hot cup of green tea.

The chefs and owners bowed and thanked me as I left. I walked out of the market and back towards the Ginza and beyond, until, six hours later, I reached the Marunouchi, between Tokyo Station and the Imperial Palace.

It was a Friday afternoon, around lunch, and suits and dresses poured out of office buildings, an army of homogeneity, not only in race but dress. Gray haired bankers and smooth faced women with designer bags hurried along into basement food courts. I got carried into their crowd and descended into low ceilinged halls of mouth-masked hawkers with plastic gloves selling box lunches of beef stew, rice, fried fish, pickled vegetables. Skinny men in suits stood at magazine stands reading comics. It was a clean crowd, packed in politeness, energetic, unflappable, professional, but the indoor air was suffocating.

I came up again, into the fresh air of day, and passed along the sidewalk exquisite luxury clothing in the windows: fur collared cashmere coats, tweed jackets, handmade leather shoes, colorful sweaters, gray wool men's suits, retailers Beams, Tomorrowland, Prada, Tom Ford, Paul Smith. Behind every freshly wiped and dust free plate glass, shop girls and shop guys, waiting and bowing, walking and folding. The servers smiled upon the served, a theater of national manners enhancing the products, living people and dead products: seductive, elegant, tailored and merchandised.

At a sculpture garden carved between tall towers, a trio played for an attentive audience as water dripped through a stream bed of plantings, under the watchful eye of navy suited security guards. Along the perimeter, surrounding the enclosure, people sat at tables drinking wine and coffee.

An old cane-carrying man, in plaid wool pants, tight knit shirt and straw hat, sat on a bench next to me. He discreetly took his little camera up to his eyes and aimed it at me.

I was in that strange, enchanted land where strangers considered *me* special and photograph worthy.

I walked to Yurakucho Station and rode up to the platform, standing in line behind two women waiting for the next train arriving in two minutes, which it did. On board, I stood silent with the other silent riders. I watched a young girl, maybe 5 years old, bow to an older seated woman as the younger child disembarked with her mom at Hamamatsucho Station. It was a touching moment of interaction and civility.

Near Tamachi Station, I purchased a bottle of water at a convenience store and paid with a handful of coins. The clerk took my money and laid it out on a tray as if they were diamonds. With his straightedge, he lined them up and separated the denominations, gently guiding them into his till. Then he bowed and thanked me.

I, an American, passed people on the street on the way back to my hotel, people who walked in security and were unworried about getting accidentally shot or mugged, people who worked at jobs without fear of dismissal, people who ate small portions and stayed thin until death, people who saved money but dressed well, people who lived in unlocked houses and apartments, people who knew if they fell sick they would not die from bankruptcy.

When calamity struck the nation, in typhoon or quake, and people died or suffered, it came from nature, not the Republican Party.

My last hours in Japan were spent on the roof of Narita Airport in the sunset watching the planes take off on the tarmac. My baggage was already loaded onto the plane, yet I thought, I fantasized, about walking back down to the train and riding back into Tokyo, so in love was I with Japan and so in dread of returning to the land of the free and the home of the brave.

No Gifts

I had never before taken a trip overseas without buying something to take back to a friend. Yet this time I vowed to come home with nothing. Nobody would receive anything thoughtful or sentimental. No one.

Ten hours later I was descending into the new international terminal at LAX, a place of soaring spaces and dirty windows, striking architecture and slow luggage. I waited an hour for my one small case to come around the conveyer belt. And then I got in line to go through customs, with all the other citizens of the world yelled at and screamed at in English (the only language!) and told to hand their papers to an fat monster immigration lady strapped and stuffed in tight trousers and black holster.

I turned my phone back on and saw twenty likes on my Instagram page from WB11. I was as delighted as if he had come in person to the airport and thrown his arms around me to welcome me back.

I got in a cab and we drove onto the 405. There was traffic of course and the driver had his radio on. He looked back at me, "Some dude is attempting to kill himself and jump off the 105 bridge," he said.

"God I'm so tired. I just want to go to sleep," I said as I slumped into the back seat.

"Where are you coming from?" he asked.

"Japan," I said.

"Oh, Japan. That's like the world capital of suicide. I heard they kill themselves as easily as we blow our noses. Why are they so miserable? Is it because they all live so close together?"

A Foreign City

Sanguine, harmonious, unbothered, I came back into town resolved to drop the bitter tics pulling me into inclement alliances, tempestuous furies, thundering madness. Maybe my peace would come from drinking hot sake, or perhaps from cutting off anyone who wronged me. I would search no more for love and seek no solace in friends.

I bought a blue glass Buddha and placed it on my desk near the south-facing window, dreaming that the light pouring into it might materialize into atmospheric tranquility to breathe into my soul.

For weeks I hardly went online and I put my many phones on vibrate. Clients sent me emails and I answered in rote brevity: *yes, no, yes, no, yes, no.*

I went for train rides into the innards of Los Angeles, taking the Metro into East Los Angeles, up to Pasadena, down to Long Beach, over to North Hollywood. I walked and rode and biked and hardly took my Jag out of the garage. I grew a beard and wore a wool driving cap indoors and out.

One night I was alone, at The Federal on Lankershim drinking an Ommegang Ale. Matan Sharon, in black leather motorcycle jacket, white jeans, suede boots, red scarf and perfectly coiffed windswept gelled hair, walked into the bar and sat down next me, apparently unaware that I was there.

I didn't say a word to him. The new me was silent, observant, full of compassion. I had infused the calm acceptance of Japan into my life.

I ordered another beer, and still Matan was seemingly unaware of me. The full beer came and before I could drink it he turned to me and said, "I'm sorry. I acted like a jerk."

I looked at him for a moment and smiled.

And then I picked up the full pint and dumped it on his head. I left the bar, walked across the street, and got on the train.

Nobody genuinely sorry ever apologizes in Los Angeles. They want something for their remorse. Remember that if you think I was wrong.

Walter Benton

Walter Benton was busy renovating his body online. He had fast little shirtless videos- of six seconds each- pumping weights and breathing hard. He posted his Photoshopped face, shaven and unshaven, his hair straightened and kinky, his complexion white one day, black the next. He uploaded a saying: "Seek Respect Not Attention."

He would probably never make me a dime, but I signed him. He became my client: gigantically insignificant, remotely unpromising, touched with multi-racialism, rap, abs, a tinge of gayness; a synthetic semi-nigger of no particular origin or destination whose streaming form danced on my phone entertaining and titillating me.

He stomped online in cut off shorts, bobbed up and down in the gym, ran fast down the alley, dropping to his knees and raising his hairy armpits in victorious fists.

A year passed and I never spoke to him. We only communicated with hearts.

I wonder if he ever got over to Tokyo.

END