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Japanese Comic Gets Rich Making Fun of Boomers

Following his lead, I tried mocking my friends, but they all said 'sayonara'

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Now that I'm in my early 60s, I keep wondering what I can do to make enough money in the next few years to retire comfortably. There aren't a lot of income-earning years left in me. What's going to get me a beachfront condo in a gated community? It would be nice if it was something I could enjoy — an expression of the real me.

The answer arrived on my doorstep recently in the form of the *New York Times*. On Page A5 was a profile of a 61-year-old stand-up comic in Japan named Yoshihiro Kariya, who goes by

the stage name of Kimimaro Ayanokoji, or just Kimimaro. Ten years ago, this struggling comedian figured out how to get rich and famous: Insult baby boomers.

His shtick is “a relentless barrage of humorous, often off-color barbs,” the *Times* wrote. In one slapstick routine described in the article, Kimimaro tells the audience that doctors have predicted that 1 in 4 Japanese will soon be senile. He then starts to count people in the first row: “One, two, three, *senile!* One two, three, *Alzheimer's!* One, two, three, *dementia!*” He has them rolling in the aisles.

According to the *Times*, Kimimaro's books and CDs have sold a million copies. He routinely fills 500-seat theaters, with tickets selling at \$300 a pop. He also markets his own brand of wine and a line of children's clothing for grandchildren.

In an effort to explain his fame, the *Times* wrote: “Japan is well-established as a global center of youth culture. ... But this is also one of the world's most rapidly aging societies, and there is a growing need for something or someone to entertain its growing ranks of retirees. No one does it better right now than Kimimaro.”

In the article, Kimimaro describes himself as one of the few comedians who can accomplish a difficult task: getting tough, wizened customers — who have seen it all and don't have a lot to laugh about anymore — to crack a smile. He calls his humor “poison-tongued comedy” that bluntly exposes the aches, pains and fears of growing old. Audiences laugh, he says, “because they are afraid.”

What they fear, he explains, isn't just their teeth and hair falling out: Aging Japanese want to escape the feelings of isolation associated with “an Americanized society in which elderly parents, who traditionally lived with their children and grandchildren, are now increasingly residing alone.”

"I have become an idol for the elderly," Kimimaro adds.

With that proclamation, my new career was launched. If Kimimaro can be an idol in Japan, why can't I become one here in America? How could I fail to get rich and famous? We have far more citizens over 50 than his island nation can claim. Almost no young people here want their parents to live with them (although it's fine for them to move back in and sponge off the old folks). Kimimaro says he shares many experiences with his core audience, who were born in the years after World War II. Me, too!

After reading the Times article, I started to craft a stand-up act that draws on my shared history with postwar Americans. While Kimimaro's routine is based on the Japanese tradition of monologue called "rakugo," mine is based on somebody my generation grew up with: Don Rickles. I call it "rickugo."

Before booking a dinner theater, I thought I should try out my material on my friends.

I began by calling Barbara, who lives in New York. It just happened to be her birthday, which I took as a favorable omen. "Hey, Barbara," I said right after she picked up the phone. "You're so old that when you went to the Tom Jones concert at Madison Square Garden, you threw your Depends on stage. ... You're so old, you need to wear a nametag when you look in the mirror. ... You're so old, you remember when there were no dead Kennedys."

"F--- you," she said, and hung up.

OK, the routine needed polishing. I called my friend Kathy in San Francisco and got her machine. "Call me," I said. "I have something I have to tell you." She called a few hours later. "What's your news?" she asked, excitedly. "Kathy," I said:

"You're so old you remember when the Dead Sea Scrolls were alive. ... You think the *Twilight* series was written by Rod Serling. ... The last time you slept with someone, you slept."

"I've really got to go," she said. "And about your drinking — it's not even noon."

After that I decided to call my friend Jennifer, who lives in Los Angeles and was married to the late Richard Pryor, the king of stand-up comics for my generation. If anyone would understand my poison-tongued humor, she would. "Jennifer," I said, "I hear you were going to get a neck lift, but all the construction cranes were booked."

"Why would you say such a horrible thing?" she asked, and started to cry uncontrollably.

I tried to send her an apology on Facebook, but she had already unfriended me.

I thought maybe I needed to bounce my jokes off men. The opportunity presented itself at Costco, where I ran into my old friend David, whom I hadn't seen in years. "Hey, David," I said. "Is that a bottle of Viagra in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?" He spun his cart around and peeled off in the opposite direction. "David," I yelled, "if you're looking for walkers, check Aisle 3. Buy five and you get a sixth one free!"

A group of retirees who'd been minivanned in from an assisted living center looked at me in disgust. "You think crippling rheumatoid arthritis is funny?" one elderly woman asked me. Then a grandfatherly type chimed in: "For once, I'm glad I have a hearing aid. I can turn it off when I'm around sickos like you."

Clearly, America's over-50 set isn't ready to laugh at themselves. Or maybe they're not that scared of getting older. But if that were the case, they wouldn't be running 20-year-old photographs of themselves on LinkedIn. No, I'm not giving up on my new career. I've decided to take my act to Japan where it'll be appreciated — where everyone's not so P.C. I've already got my first joke:

"Hey, lady, you're so old you don't shop at Hello Kitty. You shop at Hello Dinosaur."

Be afraid, Kimimaro. Be very afraid.