

## TOKYO DIARIST

# Singled Out

**A**FTER TOM CRUISE DECLARED his newfound love for Katie Holmes on “Oprah” and trashed Brooke Shields on the “Today” show, many Americans began to question the megastar’s sanity. I personally suspected something was amiss after Cruise’s pitch-perfect performance as a sexist self-help guru in the 1999 movie *Magnolia*. Cruise’s character conducts seminars instructing men in the niceties of manipulating women; he begins his lecture with, “Respect the cock.” The entire film dabbles in the absurd, but, when I was in Japan last winter, I discovered the concept of a seduction school isn’t pure fiction. Whereas, in the 1980s, Japanese women who hadn’t tied the knot at 25 were considered old maids, today many women are choosing to marry in their thirties, if at all. One result of their selectiveness is that the ranks of single men have also increased, spawning an unusual industry: institutions dedicated to helping guys land dates.

WHEN I STOPPED BY ONE OF THESE establishments with a translator, I prepared myself to be deluged by machismo. The Nagoya Bridegroom School director, Kiyoharu Ohashi, even struck me as a ringer for Cruise, with his compact frame and chic haircut. Though I couldn’t make out a word of the five-part outline he had put up on a white board, I figured it was a rough translation of *Magnolia*’s fictional “Seduce and Destroy” lecture. I settled into my seat, prepared to be disgusted.

I MIGHT HAVE REALIZED WHAT A DIFFERENT experience awaited me if I had noticed that the Nagoya enterprise was actually a nonprofit. Ohashi, a former CPA, had started the school to do his part to boost Japan’s ever dwindling birth rate (at 1.29, it is among the lowest in the world). If this man had a prototype, it wasn’t a misogynistic TV personality, but rather a Jewish mother. “Get out there,” he urged his students, most of whom were in their late thirties. “Even if you feel awkward. You are at an age where you don’t have much time left to find a part-

ner.” Ohashi recently authored a book to help his pupils, *Skills to Get Married for Men Who Don’t Have Girlfriends*. An engineer in the audience said he would be grateful for a study guide. “You are touching on things I don’t feel comfortable with,” he confided. “I don’t know if I talk about the right things. I don’t know if I wear the right clothes.” There was a pause. “I guess I don’t know how to make people like me.”

I FELT LIKE I HAD STUMBLING INTO A church confessional. The fact that it was a *guy* laying out his insecurities, in the most unlikely of venues, made it all the more embarrassing. Popular culture has essentially branded the “Will anyone love me?” lament as the provenance of women. Consider “Cathy,” the character in the eponymous cartoon strip who spent the past 28 years trying to find Mr. Right (she finally walked down the aisle last February). Or the ’80s TV hit “thirtysomething”: The two single female protagonists, Eilyn and Melissa, obsessively ruminated over their odds of meeting an eligible man, while their male counterpart, Gary, generally balked at the first sign of commitment. To be sure, the more modern fictional versions of the female singleton—the “Sex and the City” quartet, for example—demonstrated a little more verve and a little less neurosis. But overshadowing virtually every storyline was the fact that a woman’s fecundity has a sell-by date.

JAPAN HAS ITS OWN FIXATION WITH single women. One of the runaway best-sellers of recent years was *Howl of the Loser Dogs*, which detailed the frustrations of single thirtysomething writer Junko Sakai with the Japanese dating scene. In addition to spawning a TV miniseries, *Loser Dog* entered the lexicon as shorthand for older, unmarried women. Their numbers are burgeoning: In 1970, only 18 percent of Japanese women aged 25 to 29 were single; today, over half are. Part of what’s driving these women away from marriage is that they don’t want to replicate the experiences of their mothers, who were expected to stop working and dedicate themselves

entirely to their families once they married. For the most part, this is still the expectation in Japan, a country that has few day care and nanny options. “Maybe I’m a loser dog,” a young female student at the ultra-elite University of Tokyo told me. “I think it’s good to be married and to have children. But I don’t think it’s a necessity. I want to work in a good job. I want to enjoy myself.”

THE STUDENT’S COMMENT—AND SAKAI’S book—illustrate why the focus tends to be on unmarried women rather than men: They are generally more open about the uncertainties and fears—as well as more conscious of the tradeoffs—that come with being unattached. But a drop in marriage affects both genders, and the afternoon I spent at the Bridegroom School drove home how hard being alone can be for men, too. Even the timing of the class spoke to their desperation. Ohashi had scheduled the lecture for a Sunday afternoon, in part because that was the sole day the men had off from work. It wasn’t an ordinary Sunday, though: It was the day after Christmas, which functions as a quasi-Valentine’s Day in Japan. These men had, obviously, spent the romantic holiday alone.

AND OHASHI STRONGLY SUGGESTED TO me that, despite his pointers on conversation techniques and sartorial savvy, most of his students would remain on their own: He estimated that, if current trends held, about one-quarter of Japanese men in their thirties will never marry. Ohashi had given me permission to ask the students questions after class, but I was oddly paralyzed. The men I’d been prepared to view as macho hustlers just sounded insecure and lonely. In fact, they weren’t so different from the single women who are so prominently showcased in every corner of pop culture. But it’s socially unacceptable for men to voice their vulnerability—which makes it more difficult for them to grapple with the same emotional fears that single women have legitimized. The men and I respected this taboo: I didn’t go into reporter mode, and they didn’t encourage it. After a round of formal bows and tight smiles, we walked out into the frigid evening and didn’t exchange a word.

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