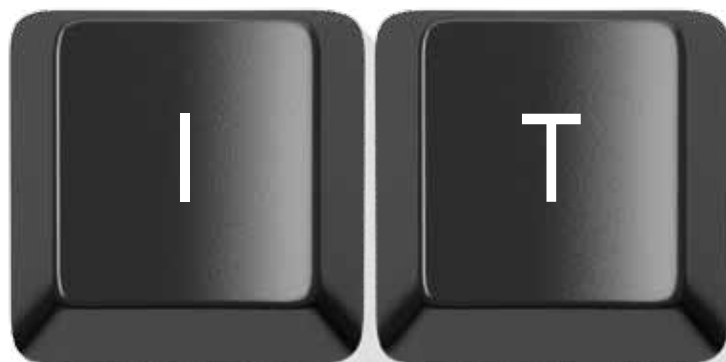
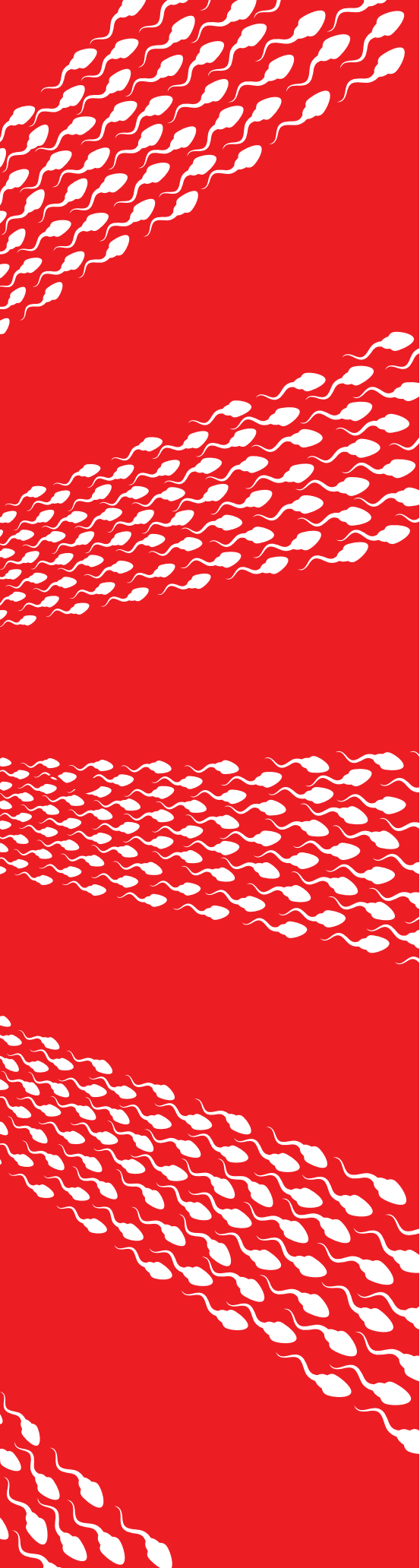





**NO
SEX,
PLEASE, WE'RE
JAPANESE**

WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON
(OR NOT GOING ON) IN JAPAN?
AND IS IT SPREADING?

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*By*  
**NEAL GABLER**



 It was a fairly typical adolescent story. He was the new kid, a sophomore transfer student at Towano High School in Japan. It took him a while to acclimate, but he eventually met three beautiful female classmates, each with soulful dark eyes and distinct personality quirks. Manaka was cute, innocent, effervescent and athletic, a fellow member of the school's tennis team. Rinko, who worked on the school library committee with him, was standoffish at first, even brusque, someone you had to get to know before she would let down her guard. Nene, whom he met at his after-school job where she also worked, was a year older and a bit more experienced—a sensitive soul.

Over the school year, he continually ran into all three, and he began dating each, getting to know their demons in the process. Manaka felt alienated and alone. Rinko had to struggle with a new step-mother. Nene was a solace to everyone but found little solace herself. So he talked to them, comforted them, helped them and, not incidentally, racked up points with them. Sometimes it was difficult juggling the relationships. They would call him at the same time or want to see him at the same place. What made it even more difficult was that the girls were so eager to please him that they would ask him what he preferred and then try to conform—in their clothes, their hairstyles, their personalities.

Eventually, he settled on Rinko, and she on him, and thus began a whirlwind of dates, gifts, selfies, chats, e-mails, compliments and sweet murmurs of “I love you,” which she once asked him to repeat publicly a hundred times. Meanwhile, she provided support, encouragement and her own professions of love. Then came the PDA and Rinko flaunting herself in a bikini, and the boy gently touching her as teenage boys are wont to do. And then...nothing. The affection never progressed to sex, and there was a good reason it didn't: Manaka, Nene and Rinko weren't real girls. They were digital cartoons in a dating-simulation game called *Love Plus*: The romantic high school sophomore was an avatar.

*Love Plus* was released by the Japanese game maker Konami in 2009 for the Nintendo DS gaming



system, and it immediately became the most popular dating simulation in the country; it has sold more than 600,000 copies in its five years on the market. As one reviewer put it, the game was “designed with addiction in mind.” By one report, the first thing some male players do each day is check their in-box for e-mails from their digital girls. Wives complain that the game pulls their husbands away from them and disrupts their families. One aggrieved wife said of her husband, “He’s always chatting with a virtual girl through the screen, as though he were dating her. As his wife, I can’t stand it anymore.” And worse, because it is DS, it is portable—even more portable with the addition of phone apps—which permitted Konami to organize a holiday weekend in the beach town of Atami where players could take their “girlfriends” for a getaway. In fact, some men are drawn so deeply into their virtual romances that the game has an SOS button for occasions when the player may feel suicidal. Tap it and the girl will try to buck up your spirits. But you can use it only once per game.

Clearly, many players treat it as if it were life, not a game. According to one review, *Love Plus* is “about a fully fledged relationship between two loving people.” And therein lies a problem—a big problem. Fewer and fewer Japanese men seem to be having sex with real women, so much so that the press has labeled the phenomenon the “celibacy syndrome.”

Get ready for some heavy statistics. The Japan Family Planning Association conducted a survey in 2013 of 3,000 men and women and found that 48.3 percent of the men and 50.1 percent of the women had not had sex in the past month—up roughly five percent from a study conducted just a year earlier. More than 20 percent of men between 25 and 29 expressed little or no interest in sex, while 45 percent of women from 16 to 24 admitted they “were not interested in or despised sexual contact.” In another survey, 23.8 percent of women called sex “bothersome.” Yet another survey found that 61 percent of men and 49 percent of women age 18 to 34 were not in any romantic relationship and that 30 percent of men in their 20s and 30s had no dating experience whatsoever. By yet *another* study, 36.7 percent of men had not had sex for more than three years. Among men between the ages of 40 and 59, 60 percent said they could be considered sexless.

Why so many studies? Because Japan is not just having a sex crisis. It’s having a birthrate crisis—this in a country where the birthrate was already lower than that of most industrialized nations. If the current trend continues, Japan’s population will shrink by a third by 2060. No sex, no babies, no growth. It’s one of the most bruited-about issues in that nation.

And it isn’t just about population growth. Sexual frequency is directly correlated to higher levels of happiness. In fact, a study by the Well-Being Program at the London School of Economics’ Center for Economic Performance rated lovemaking as the highest-rated activity in contributing to individual happiness. As Japan’s

population is declining, so apparently is its sense of joy.

And be forewarned. Some evidence suggests that in this, as in many other areas, Japan may simply have already arrived where other nations, including the United States, are headed. There can obviously be no such thing as a “post-sexual” world or there wouldn’t be any world at all. Still, something seems to be happening to our libidos. Which raises two burning questions: What is happening? And is Japan’s sexless present our future?




To answer those, it helps to play detective and find out exactly who stole Japanese sex. The Japanese themselves often accuse a generation of disaffected young men who have abandoned traditional masculine roles. Some of these are *hikikomori*, which is the equivalent of the American adult male who lives in his parents’ basement. These are withdrawn souls who seldom emerge from their hermitage. But as suspects go, this group hasn’t forsworn sex. They never had sex to begin with.

A more likely group of suspects is the “failed men” or “effeminate men” or, more colorfully, the “herbivores,” a term coined by Japanese writer Maki Fukasawa to describe androgynous young Japanese who actively eschew any sex, heterosexual or homosexual, or at the very least don’t prioritize it, as opposed to carnivores, who do. By one study, nearly half of Japanese men between the ages of 20 and 34 identified themselves as herbivores, even though many of them explicitly said they were heterosexual. By one account, given the option, they preferred buying an expensive rice cooker over more traditional male accoutrements, liked hosting desert-tasting clubs and enjoyed spa treatments.


But if you’re looking for the single largest subculture of sexual abstainers and the group most often charged with sexual diminution, go to Akihabara, a district in lower Tokyo that was once the appliance center of the city, then the computer and technology center, and is now the manga (comic book) and anime (animation) center, where store after store after store sells pictures and objects related to comics and animation. Basically, Akihabara is geek city, and its inhabitants are known as *otaku*. According to Patrick Galbraith, an *otaku* scholar and author of *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan*, the term arose in the 1980s to describe young men and women who were intense fans of one particular thing but who were also “lacking in social common sense,” which is to say they didn’t navigate the social world very well. In America, for example, Twilighters, who are fans of the *Twilight* series, or Gleeeks, who are obsessed with *Glee*, would be *otaku*. In Japan, *otaku* were especially fixated on manga, anime and computer and video games.

How fixated? Well, as Galbraith says, over time they became *very* fixated. Throughout the 1980s, *otaku* became emotionally and sexually invested in what are known in Japan as *bishojo*, or “cute girls,” those big-eyed, pert-nosed, round cartoon girls you often see in anime. In fact, some *otaku* had become so invested that *Manga Burikko*, a magazine that catered to *otaku*, drew readers’ protests for including nude photos of real-life girls alongside cartoon nudes. Many readers demanded erotic *bishojo* only.

If that sounds weird to us, and it should, it sounded equally weird to most Japanese. And that is when *otaku* became a synonym not for *geeks* (continued on page 135)



**JAPAN IS  
NOT JUST  
HAVING  
A SEX  
CRISIS. IT'S  
HAVING A  
BIRTH-  
RATE  
CRISIS.**





## NO SEX PLEASE, WE'RE JAPANESE

*Continued from page 86*

but for oddballs who lusted for *bishojo*, and not just oddballs but downright perverts. And as far as sex was concerned, that's when the *otaku* began to be viewed not just as shy fellows who were afraid of women but as men who were incapable of real sex. "See, these *otaku* are definitely lacking something in the masculine behavior department," wrote one critic. "Most of them leer over cutouts of Minky Momo and Nanako [anime characters], yet can't bring themselves to speak to an actual woman." *Otaku* became outcasts.

The Japanese coined a name for their sexual obsession: "two-dimensional complex." Some men carry life-size pillows of their favorite manga, anime and video game characters, taking them to movies, cafés and shops and expressing their feelings to them. Others play *Love Plus*, and one man actually arranged to "marry" his digital girlfriend Nene in a televised ceremony. "Now that the ceremony is over," wrote the groom to a Japanese blogger, "I feel like I've been able to achieve a major milestone in my life. Some people have expressed doubts about my actions, but at the end of the day, this is really just about us as husband and wife."

Perhaps the most bizarre manifestation of the two-dimensional complex is *hentai*, which refers to highly explicit sexual animations that depict not only boy-girl intercourse but bestiality (squid and octopus tentacles are particularly popular), rape, violence, incest and the fantasy of cartoon girls with animal characteristics such as horns and dog ears. Anything goes in *hentai*. But its defenders insist this isn't just a matter of pure arousal, even though in one study a majority of *otaku* admitted to masturbating to *hentai*. They say *otaku* have real feelings for the cartoon girls, just like the feelings generated by *Love Plus*. One *hentai* artist told Galbraith, "Look, it's about liquids. You either come or you cry." But whether you cry or come, you aren't having real sex. You're having a strange facsimile of sex.

And that's the problem.



So it's the guys' fault. Except that young Japanese women haven't shown much interest in sex lately either, if you remember those statistics—those 49 percent of young women who weren't in a romantic relationship and those 45 percent who weren't in-

terested in or actually despised sex. That certainly seems to have affected relationships. The number of married couples in Japan is in steep decline, which may not speak to the frequency of sex but does speak to the plummeting birthrate, since the Japanese stigmatize illegitimacy. One in four women in their 20s is unlikely ever to be married, and 40 percent are unlikely to have a child. Some female abstainers seem to be responding to the changing male persona. They want stronger men, not herbivores and *otaku*. According to Japan's Institute of Population and Social Security, 90 percent of young women said that staying single is "preferable to what they imagine marriage to be like." And some men seem to be responding to the changing female persona of stronger, more independent women—a persona that earned the sobriquet "devil wife" for women who continue to work after marriage. One man told a reporter, "I don't like real women. They're too picky nowadays." Meanwhile, an unmarried Japanese female magazine editor said, "Maybe we've learned how to service ourselves." Gynecologist Kunio Kitamura has another explanation. He thinks women feel "sex is more trouble than it's worth."

And just to complete the picture, it isn't just singles who have gone sexless. Married couples in Japan are abstaining from sex too. That Family Planning Association survey found that 40 percent of married couples are sexless, defined as having sex fewer than 12 times a year, and couples who have sex three or more times a week are only three percent of the married population. A survey of 600 married women found that 26 percent hadn't had *any* sex in the past year. Of course, the Japanese have a name for this too: "sex disgust syndrome."

But before you conclude the Japanese are just a lot of abstinent weirdos, you come upon another clue in the search for the missing sex: the evidence referred to earlier that declining sexuality seems to be an international phenomenon. In Britain, for example, the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles revealed that sexual frequency among men and women age 16 to 44 has dropped in the past decade from an average of 6.2 times per month for men and 6.3 for women to 4.9 and 4.8 respectively—compared with four times a month for the young Japanese. Said the principal investigator of the survey, Dr. Anne Johnson of University College London, "We tend to think that these days we live in an increasingly sexually liberal society, but the truth is far more complex." Brits are having less sex now than they used to.

A survey on sexual frequency commissioned by the condom manufacturer Durex found that Greece was the most active country, with 87 percent of Greeks having sex weekly. Russia (80 percent), China (78 percent) and Italy (76 percent) also rated high in sexual activity. But amorous France listed at 70 percent, Germany at 68 percent, Canada at 59 percent and the United States at 53 percent, which placed it just above Japan at 34 percent. All of which suggests, again, that we aren't as

randy as we like to think we are.

To get deeper inside those statistics, you can look at the 2010 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior conducted by the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University. It shows that 56.9 percent of single American men age 18 to 24 did not have vaginal sex in the previous year, which falls to 46.6 percent for men 25 to 29 years old. (For women the numbers were 50.8 percent and 43 percent.) But even for those men with partners, not spouses, the numbers were 26 percent and 20.8 percent respectively, and only 30 percent and 36.4 percent of those respective age groups were having sex weekly or a few times a month. Another researcher concluded that American men over 18 may claim they average 63 sex acts per year, but they're not telling the truth. The actual figure, he has determined, is 30 times—once every 12 days. Not exactly orgy stats. A similar 2008 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics determined that fully 27 percent of men 15 to 24 had never engaged in sex at all—up from 22 percent in 2002.

And if the frequency is dropping, so is the level of sexual satisfaction, which, according to the Durex survey, includes the ability to orgasm, freedom from sexual dysfunction, good health and an “exciting” sex life. Greece again led the list—those horny, happy Greeks!—at 51 percent. Further down were Germany (38 percent), France (25 percent), and the United States and Canada tied at 48 percent, which is still above the international average of 43 percent. (For the record, Japan is at 15 percent.) A more recent Durex survey of Americans, from 2012, itemized their sexual complaints—too fast (37 percent) and infrequent simultaneous orgasms (37 percent)—and added that 65 percent daydream about making love outside the bedroom. So here it is: Like the Japanese, we don't seem to be having all that much sex, and most of us aren't particularly enjoying the sex we do have.

You may have gotten the idea by now from all this data that it's a pretty grim picture. But before we try to identify the worldwide culprit responsible for the lack of sexual interest, a few caveats are in order. The first is that not everyone buys into the idea of rampant sexlessness. Some Japanese say the whole focus on sexlessness is just a sensationalist Western spin that took off when *The Guardian* website in Britain posted a 2013 article with the luridly provocative title “Why Have Young People in Japan Stopped Having Sex?” These defenders of Japanese sexuality say that one could make an anecdotal case, at least, that there is a lot of sex going on in Japan, which accounts for the fancy love hotels, where couples escape for discreet affairs, and for the persistence of a highly sexualized *yanki* culture of young revelers who stand in stark contrast to the *otaku*. Some think the Japanese are so comfortable with sex that they don't need to talk about it, even to pollsters, or that they can be more honest, which may apply to the rest of the industrialized world as well.

As Merry White, a Boston University anthropologist who specializes in modern Japanese culture, surmises, “Maybe sex is so normal that it’s lost its excitement”—by which she means not the excitement of the sex act itself but the excitement of talking about it.

Moreover, though it’s clear marriage rates are falling not only in Japan but throughout the industrialized world (from 72 percent of Americans in 1960 to 51 percent now), some of this may have to do with increased rates of cohabitation and not declining interest in relationships. For example, in the United States since 2010 a plurality of people between 25 and 34 have never been married. To underscore that, in a 2010 Pew Research Survey, nearly 40 percent of Americans said that marriage was “obsolete.” And while it’s true the birthrate in Japan and, again, in most of the industrialized world, is declining, one can’t extrapolate from that fact that people are having less sex. That’s what birth control is for. And finally there’s the question of what constitutes sex. Even if young people are having less vaginal sex, it’s possible they’re having other kinds of sex that don’t show up in surveys.

And yet, even when you take those caveats into consideration, it is difficult to avoid the evidence that sexual activity has diminished. We know the *what*, and we know the *who*. But we still need to find the *why*.



You may get closer to the source when you think of those men playing *Love Plus* and its later iteration, *Love Plus +*. The Japanese have blamed those game-obsessed, manga-obsessed, anime-obsessed *otaku*, but the *otaku* aren’t the cause of the decline in sex. They are examples of it. What they have discovered is that technology can provide many of the satisfactions of sex, though obviously not its most powerful satisfaction, and in doing so, they may point to a different kind of sexual future. And yet, what seems new-fashioned—two-dimensional love—may actually be very old-fashioned. Looking for the sorts of relationships that they have been unable to enjoy with real women, deep and caring relationships, the *otaku* displaced that desire onto manga and anime characters. You could say they were looking for true love and found it. Sure, vaginal sex would have been great, but it wasn’t the primary objective. Or as the *otaku* expert Patrick Galbraith has observed, “Sometimes what people say about *otaku* is that they are asocial or antisocial. But I think in most cases they are just social in a different way.” That is digitally social.

You might think of it like this: Many young men and women in Japan, and many in the United States for that matter, are suffering from an intimacy gap—the gap between what they want, which is real and compliant partners, and what they can have in a fast-moving, pressurized, atomized world. According to one survey, 82.2 percent of Japanese men in their 20s who were not in a relationship nevertheless said they still wanted to have sex. Now technology can sort of fill that gap without all the

Sturm und Drang of human relationships, which is a large part of the appeal of *Love Plus*. It's painless. Computer scientist David Levy even predicts a time when our partners will be replaced by robots—essentially partners designed to our specifications.

Part of this is narcissism. Part is convenience. When it is so much easier to fill the intimacy gap with technology than with real human companionship and real-life sex, a whole lot of people are likely to do so, despite the very real physical deficits. Indeed, we have a culture of digital intimacy, some of which can lead to real intimacy—everything from sexting to social media to dating apps such as Tinder, of whose users one *New York Times* reporter recently wrote, “Their erotic energy was focused on the touchscreens of their smartphones.” Digital connection is so rampant among millennials that there are now “textationships,” those that are conducted exclusively by smartphone (and obviously sexless), as distinguished from those that are IRL—“in real life.” The fact that we have an acronym for *non*-digital relationships speaks volumes. And while social media can certainly facilitate hookups and should lead to more sex, we've seen that they haven't necessarily had that effect. Even among collegiate 18-to-25-year-olds, a randy and ripe group if ever there was one—and one that is addicted to social media—a University of Portland study comparing sex from the period 1988 to 1996 with sex from 2002 to 2010 showed that in the latter era 59.3 percent had had sex in the past year, down from 65.2 percent in the earlier period.

While it is possible that having more access to more partners, as social media allow, has made men and women more picky rather than more promiscuous, it is equally possible that technology in this country is as much a substitute for intimacy as it is in Japan. For \$25 a month a new service called Invisible Boyfriend creates a virtual BF who sends e-mails and texts to girls hoping to stop their parents and friends from pestering them with questions as to why they aren't in a relationship. The user chooses the name, physical characteristics and personality of the phantom lover. And for those who want to take a deeper plunge into virtual intimacy, there has long been the popular website Second Life, which is self-descriptive. Users choose an avatar who then interacts with other avatars in an alternative reality. Those interactions include romance, though one has only to visit a Second Life forum to see that these virtual relationships are just as fraught as real ones. “If we were meant to be that fictional person we created,” commiserated one Second Life user to another, “we would be already. Eventually the truth comes out.”

But technology is a capability. It isn't a motive, and motive is what we're looking for. That leads us to the real issue—the reason *otaku* are fixated on manga and anime, the reason so many young people around the world are seeking intimacy in the digital realm of social media and not IRL, the reason there seems to be a reluctance to form relationships and, yes, the reason sex



doesn't seem to be as much fun for many folks as it used to be.

That reason is anxiety.

Begin with Japan. Perhaps more than any other industrialized country, Japan is gripped by anxiety or, rather, anxieties. Japan had always been the land of the salaryman—"everyone employed from cradle to grave, everyone more or less sure of his future," as Merry White puts it. Japan's exceptionalism was that life was both predictable and secure. But then came the economic downturn of the 1990s and the great deflation, and suddenly the salaryman was a "dinosaur," in White's term. All the predictability, all the security was gone. The hardest hit was the Japanese middle class, and the hardest hit in the middle class were the young. They were thrust into what one cultural anthropologist called the "precariat," meaning they were living precariously. By one study, only 3.5 percent of men age 25 to 34 make more than the average worker's income. With diminished economic prospects came diminished prospects for marriage and for children and even for sex. Jeff Kingston, professor at Temple University in Tokyo and author of *Contemporary Japan*, calls the economic catastrophe, from which Japan has still not fully recovered, a "betrayal."

The anxiety that came from that betrayal has had tremendous ramifications. It has forced young Japanese to "invent the world you're going to have to live in," according to White. And it is that reinvention that has contributed to the new sexual landscape. They know they can't operate the way their parents did, even if they wanted to. But many of them have decided they don't want to. Their lifestyle, including its sexual aspects, is a kind of rebellion against the old Japanese values of a stable middle-class life.

Seen this way, the *hikikomori*, the *kawaii* (cute) boys, the herbivores and the *otaku* are not just peculiar. They're deliberately, willfully peculiar. They want to challenge the culture that failed them and, frankly, failed itself. After all, many of those older sexless married couples say they work so hard now that they're too tired for sex. "There's an ideal that people don't match or want to match," says Galbraith, "so that increasingly they're not finding themselves in those kinds of relationships that are recognized as committed, reproductive relationships." In effect, not having sex, not getting married, is a way to stick it to society—to take the psychological damage society inflicted on them and give it a political twist.

Of course Japan is hardly the only nation suffering from economic hardship and anxiety. And that's where the rest of the world, including the United States, comes in. (How to explain those sexy Greeks, who are in dire economic straits, is a conundrum.) While they may not all be in the throes of rebellion, worldwide there is now an entire generation wounded by postrecession economic, social and even sexual anxiety, and many of them, like the Japanese, are in the process of reinvention, trying to figure out new modes of survival,

new forms of intimacy, new ways of avoiding commitments they can't fulfill. As MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle writes in *Alone Together*, an analysis of technology and interpersonal relationships, "We look to technology for ways to be in relationships and to protect ourselves from them at the same time." Basically, this generation is afraid.

None of this is necessarily irreversible. In time, anxiety can subside, people can regain their economic footing and their confidence, as is happening in America right now, and presumably the desire to have IRL relationships, sexual and otherwise, can return. It's all biological, says Justin Garcia, a research fellow at the Kinsey Institute who has studied the effect of technology on sex. "There are certain things that happen when you see someone, when you taste someone, when you smell someone, when you hear the sound of their voice," he says. "And we have mechanisms that have evolved in our brains to respond to those types of unique human interactions." That's why, Garcia believes, technology can never replace sex. You can't get all those things from *Love Plus* or Invisible Boyfriends or sexting or robots, so no matter how many people have sought refuge from their anxieties in virtual intimacy, disappearing sex is likely to make a reappearance. Or as an oddsmaker might say, never bet against sex.

