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The Representation Of Marginal Youth In Contemporary Japanese Popular Fiction: Marginal Youth And Ishida Ira's Ikebukuro West Gate Park

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THE REPRESENTATION OF MARGINAL YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE POPULAR FICTION: MARGINAL YOUTH AND ISHIDA IRA'S
IKEBUKURO WEST GATE PARK

A Thesis Presented

by

JONATHAN W. LAWLESS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Popular fiction can take many forms and is primarily written and read for pleasure. Sometimes, however, it can contain more than just a good story; there are times when it can also be used to subtly prove a point, or provide critical commentary on some aspect of society. Contemporary Japanese popular fiction is no exception. There is a trend in recent Japanese popular fiction to provide criticism on the state of traditional social institutions, particularly those of education and employment, as well as a movement toward shedding light on little-spoken of problems in society. One such area that has received much attention recently is the issue of youth and their portrayal in society. Counter to an often negative representation of modern youth by the media, many popular Japanese authors have begun to consciously attack media-driven stereotypes and attempt to create a positive image of youth, while at the same time continuing to bring to the everyday reader important social questions often reserved for discussion among academics and critics.

For the purposes of this thesis I intend to concentrate on the topic of marginal youth in twenty-first century Japan and how they are portrayed in popular Japanese fiction. While mainstream Japan is guided by a strict set of rules, there is a subculture of youths who have either failed out of the Japanese “system” or left it of their own will. Because these kids have “failed” the normal system of education and employment (the two factors most frequently used to determine status and success in Japan), they are cast out from “normal” society, seen and treated as outsiders, and thus deemed “bad”. Yet,

in popular Japanese fiction it is often these youths that have the power to affect true change and help people, and it is these youths that represent the “good” in these stories; in fact, members of “normal” Japanese society (or its institutions) often play the role of the villain. Perhaps the way in which marginal youth is represented in popular fiction, therefore, shows a shift in Japanese popular opinion about the current social system. My goal in this thesis is to at once show the fact that authors of popular fiction in Japan are attempting to highlight and promote the discussion of issues of marginal youth often disregarded by the general populace and that through their depictions of these youth popular authors are attempting to break overwhelmingly negative stereotypes and replace them with more positive portrayals of youth in Japan, representations which may also hold tentative suggestions with how to deal with larger issues that contemporary Japanese society must face in the twenty-first century.

In order to discuss trends in contemporary popular fiction I will use as my example Ishida Ira and his popular hardboiled mystery series, Ikebukuro West Gate Park. The Ikebukuro West Gate Park series is a collection of short stories, currently made up of seven books comprised of four stories each. The first, eponymous story won Ishida the 36th All-Readings Mystery Novel New Author Award (*Dai 36 kai ōru yomimono suiri shōsetsu shinjin shō*) in 1997, and was included in his first book (of the same name), published in 2001. A television drama based on the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series helped to further its success. Ishida, one of the most prolific popular fiction writers in recent years, has written several books and short stories in a wide assortment of genres, including romance, sci-fi, and fantasy, in addition to his popular mysteries. The main character and first-person narrator of all the stories in the Ikebukuro West

Gate Park series is Makoto Majima, an eighteen year-old (he gets older accordingly as the series progresses) who just managed to graduate from a low-level technical high school, and since has done nothing of real consequence. Many of his friends, like him, either barely graduated or dropped out of school, including one of his best friends, Takashi Yasufuji, who is the leader of the gang kids who hang around Ikebukuro. Together with several of his similarly “marginal” friends that flit in and out of the different stories, Makoto plays problem-solver to many of the troubles that plague Ikebukuro’s streets.

While I will be raising examples from throughout the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series to further my point, chapter two of this thesis is a translation of the first story in its entirety. My reasons for choosing this story are twofold. First, it is the first story in the series, and therefore serves as an introduction to both the world of Ikebukuro West Gate Park and to two of the main characters, Makoto (the narrator) and Takashi (leader of the local street gangs). The second reason is because this story exemplifies many of the characteristics of this series – there are several different examples of marginal youth, there are explorations into the thoughts of these youth on society and justice, and there is a strong dichotomy between the youth and adult worlds at work in this story. The translation precedes the critical essay for several reasons: “Ikebukuro West Gate Park” was written first and foremost to be an entertaining story, and I wish the reader to view it as such before reading any further meaning into it; some of my points in the critical essay may become clearer if the reader already has some first-hand knowledge of the series; and, to express my belief that the act of translation is a worthwhile pursuit in itself. As Edward Fowler states in his article on the politics of translating Japanese

fiction, the addition of critical essays to translations to make them noteworthy leads to a view of translation as second-rate.¹ The critical section of this thesis is not intended as proof of why translating “Ikebukuro West Gate Park” was worthwhile or why it is important in the field of literature, but, rather, I use my translation of the story here as an extended example.

Following the translation is the third chapter, which is an explanation of the Japanese social system, views held of youth in general in Japan, and marginal youth. As for the Japanese social system, I discuss issues of education and employment that define the “normal” in society. This becomes important in defining both problems in Japan at the institutional level and the borders between normality and marginality. This is followed by a discussion on the importance of youth in Japan’s aging society – as Japan’s populace grows steadily older, how are the views of youth changing, and what of the hopes and demands placed upon them? To answer these questions I explore issues of the so-called “wild child” and other undesirables, and how they are received within the demands placed upon them by the older generations. This leads to a section on marginal youth, including the definition of marginal youth and examples of marginal groups found in contemporary Japanese society. Finally I end with a brief look at juvenile delinquency in Japan, using official government-gathered data to show the relatively low rates of crime among Japanese youth.

Chapter four deals exclusively with the fictional world of Ishida Ira’s Ikebukuro West Gate Park: the people in it, their views, and the issues the books address. Included in this chapter are examples of marginal youth throughout the series, broken up into

¹ Edward Fowler, “Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 18 (1): 18-19 (1992).

distinct character types and including an examination of their actions and thoughts on society. This is followed by a longer section devoted solely to Makoto, who as the narrator and main protagonist of all the stories necessarily presents the strongest example. After this character sketch are sections about the distinction between marginality and normality in the series, the relationships between youth and adults in the stories, and a brief section on the issues of community and identity among marginal youth in Ikebukuro West Gate Park.

The main focus of the fifth chapter will be to examine Ishida Ira's motivation in writing the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series, and what message he is trying to get across to the general reader. To see more clearly how this series is to some extent a reflection of real issues in Japan, I begin by examining Ishida and his technique of "writing the now." After this I focus on how Ishida draws on stereotyped images to create his characters, and then from within that framework works to destroy those very same stereotypes. This includes mainly stereotyped media portrayals of marginal youth, and also, to some extent, broad stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in Japan. At this point I end the chapter on the topics of popular fiction and genre and how authors of popular fiction use these to their advantage in bringing their message to as broad an audience as possible.

I conclude my thesis with a reflection on how Ishida Ira and his contemporaries are using their fiction to create dialogue about the failing systems of modern Japan and the way that youth are viewed within such a society, as well as how their generally positive portrayals of marginal youth might in fact act as alternatives when attempting to deal with these problems. Using the topics addressed in chapter five, chapter six

brings together the issues of contemporary Japan as discussed in chapter three with the relevant ideas from the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series examined in chapter four in an attempt to show how one popular fiction author, Ishida Ira, works to both raise awareness about pertinent issues and social problems in contemporary Japan and explore the potential of youth through a more positive literary portrayal of marginal youth in Japan.

CHAPTER 2

IKEBUKURO WEST GATE PARK

There is one *purikura* stuck to the back side of my PHS. A faded sticker with the five members of my team bursting from a tight frame. The picture on the frame is of a green jungle. A bunch of indecent monkeys are swinging around after bananas. It's no different from the real world. In the *purikura* we're pressed together cheek to cheek, and with our faces lined up in a row we look like we've just heard the funniest joke ever. Naturally, Hikaru and Rika are there, too. I can't remember what we thought was so funny. Some people ask me how long I plan on keeping that sticker there. Every time I make up some answer like, "It's a memory of summer," or, "It's the glory of the past." But the truth is, I'm not really sure why I leave it there either.

* * *

My name is Makoto Majima. Last year I graduated from the local technical high school here in Ikebukuro. Very impressive. At my school, by the time graduation rolls around about a third of the students have dropped out. A certain Youth Division officer I know, Yoshioka, once told me that my school was a farm for *yakuza*. Stealing, drugs, fighting. Any punk with a strong arm was immediately scouted from above. There were even some among them that were too dangerous to become *yakuza*. Yamai for example. I just couldn't get away from him since elementary school. He was huge, square, got angry easily, and for some reason the hair on his head was hard as a rock. Try to imagine a hundred and eighty-five-centimeter-tall refrigerator with about ten thousand golden wires sticking straight up off the top. And don't forget the chain, the kind

usually reserved for vicious dogs, that connects the piercings in his ear and nose. As far as I know, his fight record is at four hundred ninety-nine wins, one loss, out of five hundred fights. I'll tell you all about that one loss later.

The incident that gave him his nickname was in the summer of our second year of junior high. Yamai and some other member of our class made some stupid bet. Whether or not he could beat the Doberman that we always saw at the General Ward Gymnasium outside the station's east gate. Yamai said that he could beat it, someone said he couldn't, and then we all bet our snack money one way or the other. The next Saturday Yamai and a crowd of other people filtered out of the gate of the junior high school and we all made our way to the gym. The dog was there. The old man who owned the dog was sitting far across the open space in front of the gym. The Doberman was wandering around, sniffing the stank under the bench. Yamai had a chunk of lean beef in his left hand and he held it out for the dog. The dog wagged its tail in delight and came running toward him. Yamai sunk his favorite weapon deep into his right hand. A wooden pole with a fifteen centimeter nail shoved through it. T-shaped, like a corkscrew for cheap wine. I had seen him sharpen the point of the weapon during shop class. Sparks flying from the tip of a fifteen centimeter nail. When the Doberman jumped for the meat, mouth drooling, Yamai pulled the meat back, and thrust his right hand straight out. Fifteen centimeters of nail being absorbed by the dog's narrow forehead. Watching from way back, I couldn't even hear the sound. Yamai scooped it up once in a swinging motion, then yanked the spike out. The dog fell at his feet. Almost no blood spilled from the dog's forehead. The Doberman blew foam from its mouth and its whole body was convulsing. I heard someone throw up. We all disappeared from the place fast.

Starting the following Monday, his nickname became “Doberman-killer Yamai.”

* * *

Since graduating high school I haven’t done anything. I couldn’t get a proper job, and I didn’t feel like it either. Part-time jobs are boring and I can’t motivate myself. When I run out of money, I help out at the fruit shop my mom runs to get some pocket change.

When I say fruit shop, I’m not talking about the tidy little fruit parlors like the ones in Ginza. Our store is in the Ikebukuro West Old Shopping District. People from around here would understand just from that. The street is a string of fashion massage parlors, adult video stores, and barbecue restaurants. It’s my mom that watches over the street stall my old man left behind when he died, a store with nothing very special about it. Displayed at the front of the shop are melons or watermelons, new loquats or peaches or cherries – only the more expensive things are on display there. So to nab drunks whose purse strings have loosened a bit, the store is open until the last train has gone; there’s sure to be at least one like it around any other station, that kind of shop. That’s my house. It’s only five minutes on foot to West Gate Park from the shop. Half of that is waiting for the streetlight.

Last summer, whenever I had some spare change or one of my friends had some cash, we spent most of our time on a bench in Ikebukuro West Gate Park. Just sitting there idly, waiting for something to happen. There’s nothing for us to do today, and no plans for tomorrow either. The same monotonous twenty-four hours, over and over. But even with that kind of day to day life it’s possible to make friends.

* * *

Around that time my best friend was Masa. Masa is short for Masahiro Mori. A genius who by some miracle managed to slide his way into the worst of colleges after graduating from the same high school as me. But he hardly ever got near the campus, and always hung out with me at West Gate Park. He said that when he was with me he had good luck picking up girls. He bared his chest openly, black from the tanning salon, and in his left ear he had three piercings. On a rainy day last June, we were in the Marui near the west gate. Cover from the rain. When you have no money, rainy days are always trouble. There's no place to go. Since neither of us had a cent, we just walked around the inside of the store aimlessly, unable to buy anything. Bored, we went to check out the underground Virgin Megastore's bookstore, and there we saw something interesting. Photographic collections, art books – the corner of the store where they keep expensive things. A short guy wearing glasses, a little on the skinny side, was stuffing his shoulder bag with an oversized book. The little guy, acting all nonchalant, made it safely past the register with book in hand. He went up the escalator to the first floor and left from Marui's main entrance. We followed after the little squirt. We crossed the intersection and caught up with him in the open area in front of the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space building, where we called out to the runt from behind. He leapt about a meter into the air. Nice. I wonder how much he's worth? The three of us went into a nearby coffee shop.

* * *

In the end, we didn't make a cent. We only got free iced coffees out of it. The little guy's name was Shunji Mizuno. He told us that the book he stole was a collection of artwork by some French animator. At first Shun hardly said anything, but at some

point he started speaking fast and then we couldn't make him stop. He came to Tokyo from the countryside, and had been going to design school for three months. He talked with almost no one. He had no friends. Only idiots at the school. Class was boring.

Even when talking fast, there was no emotion in his eyes. A little dangerous. Masa and I made eye contact. This was going nowhere. Even if we tried to rob him there was nothing to gain. Shun took a sketchbook from his bag and showed us some illustrations he had drawn himself. Really good. But what good is that? It's just a picture, nothing more. We left the shop and went our separate ways.

The next day Masa and I were sitting on a bench in West Gate Park when Shun came over and sat down next to us without saying a word. He pulled out his sketchbook and started drawing illustrations. The next day was the same. And so Shun became our friend.

* * *

The true face of Ikebukuro West Gate Park (when we're trying to be cool we always call it "West Gate Park" in English) shows itself in the middle of the night on weekends. The circular area around the fountain becomes a hook-up coliseum. The girls sit on the benches and the boys circle around and talk to them all in turn. If they hit it off, they leave. Bars, karaoke, and love hotels are all right there next to the park. Several huge CD players the size of dressers are set up in front of the fountain, and the dancer teams practice their choreography in time with the bass, the kind that reverberates in your stomach. On the other side of the fountain the singers sit on the ground holding onto their guitars and sing/shout something. After the last bus of the day has left, gang members from Saitama line their cars up in the terminal and cruise around

slowly, coaxing girls over from behind smoked-glass windows. Hey, you wanna get with us? The Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space, which is parallel with the park, closes its shutters at night, but the area in front of it is a playground for style. The boarder and BMX teams compete with each other, performing acrobatics on their skateboards and mountain bikes. Each team has their own invisible territory in West Gate Park and the warriors among the G-boys prowl the borders like sharks searching for the smell of blood. The public restroom in the corner of the park is a market. All night long they're all buying and selling stuff. Every five minutes a seller goes into the bathroom and a schoolgirl wearing loose socks disappears into the men's bathroom with him.

And every time Saturday came around, as if immersing ourselves in boiling water, we spent the whole night killing time at West Gate Park. Sometimes we picked up girls, and sometimes we were picked up. We picked fights and took them up. But usually nothing happened at night, and while we were waiting for something to happen, the sky in the east would become clear, the summer night would brighten, and the first train of the day would start to move. Even so, we went to "West Gate Park."

Because there was nothing else to do.

* * *

It was just such a night when we met Hikaru and Rika, too. That particular night we had money – rare for us – and Masa's attempts to get girls were also coming up with nothing – rare in itself. It looked like the sun was going to come up at any minute, so Masa started to panic and talk to girls one after another. If they looked up for it, that was good enough. I gazed absently at the water in the fountain as it sprang up into the air, then came tumbling down. Shun was under a streetlamp drawing in his sketchbook

as always. That's when four legs appeared in front of us. Both of them in the popular white leather sandals. The ones with fifteen centimeter heels. One pair of legs were perfectly shaped, white and naturally long. The other pair were short, but well-tanned, and with plenty of flesh.

"Watcha doin'?" the black one asked us after taking a peek at Shun's sketchbook. A slip dress the color of pearl. Big eyes and a face that looked a little bit like a monkey. Her hair was cut short, and she was short and cute. Maybe sixteen-ish?

"Oh my god, like, that's *so* good!" Why do young girls always have such loud voices? Their laughter is like a siren.

"Tone it down," I said without thinking, and then the white one responded, "What's wrong with that? We're just looking at his picture."

The white one was tall, with a teeny black midriff-baring mini-T and miniskirt. Her breasts were huge, and they were thrust up at an angle. She looked like one of the pin-up girls from "Young Magazine." When I met her eyes they shone a bright brown. What is she, only half-Japanese?

"Hey hey, relax you two. Shun, draw a picture of these two lovely ladies in your notebook there. Seeing as how your drawings aren't useful any other time than this," said Masa, having come back quickly once he realized that we were talking with girls. It looked like he was interested in them. Especially the white one. He was doing his best to put the moves on her. After a while, Shun finished the drawing. Toward the bottom of the page the black girl was on the pavement of West Gate Park. With cat ears and a tail. Her legs were flung out to the sides in a sexy, inviting pose and she had a fawning slight smile on her lips. The other girl was at the top of the picture. Pure white, she had

large angel wings and was floating in the air. A far-away gaze and a sad profile. The first time I noticed it was when I saw Shun's illustration. The fact that the white girl was extremely beautiful. The girls loved the picture. After that the five of us went to a nearby karaoke box. Because it was dawn, and our stomachs were empty. And we sang many of the same kind of songs. The tall, white girl introduced herself as Hikariko Shibuzawa, and the short, black girl introduced herself as Rika Nakamura. Hikaru told us, "Never call me by my real name, Hikariko, ok?" I thought it was a little strange, but then again, I've had an ugly girl from Saitama tell me to call her Jennifer before. Whatever. It wasn't until much later that I learned the reason why Hikaru hated her name so much.

After it was already too late.

* * *

From then on, Hikaru and Rika began coming to "West Gate Park" every day. The upper-class high school they both went to was also in summer vacation. The five of us ended up always hanging out and having fun together. In the beginning, every time we met, Hikaru would always come with a present for somebody. The first time was German-made watercolor colored pencils for Shun, as thanks for the drawing the other day. Sixty-four colors neatly arranged in a wooden box, dazzling. Until then I had never even seen such a thing. Next, she gave Masa sapphire earrings. The holdings were twenty-two karats. She said they were worthless stones she bought from her friend, a jeweler's daughter. Last was me. Nike Air Jordan's. The '95 Michael Jordan model. I thought they'd suit you Mako. After all, I want the head of our team to be cool, right?

Don't worry, I have a relative that runs an imported goods sports shop, so I got them cheap. Angelic smile. I took them reluctantly.

Later I called Rika over and asked her.

“Is Hikaru always like this?”

“Yea, most of the time. If it's a person she likes.”

“Is her family rich?”

“Seems so, rumor has it her family's been rich for generations.”

“What does her father do?”

“I heard he's an important person in the Ministry of Finance.”

* * *

The next day I called up just Hikaru on my PHS. Our meeting place was the east gate's P' PARCO. I sat on the shrubs near the entrance and waited. In the small sky above Ikebukuro I could see thunderheads. Hikaru came right at the agreed time. A white, sleeveless one-piece dress with white, high boots. She looked like Amuro given a little more height, made a little whiter, and with a little extra glamour. That just about covers it. I could feel the gazes of all the men in the vicinity tracing the line of Hikaru's body from top to bottom. She sat down next to me and the men all suddenly looked aside.

“This is the first time I've seen you when it's just the two of us, Mako.”

“True.”

“You have something to talk to me about, right? It's hot here, so let's go to a café or something. I'll pay for it.”

“No, that's ok. I was the one who called you, so I'll pay.”

We went to a nearby McDonald's. Two iced coffees. We got seats near the window on the second floor. From the window we could see the waves of people in front of Ikebukuro Station.

“So, what did you want to tell me?”

“It's about the presents.”

A strange expression. Hikaru was silent.

“You gave presents to everyone, right? So that's it with the presents. You understand?”

“What, I don't get it.”

Suddenly she pouted. Her eyes glistened as she gave me an upward glance. What, is she going to cry?

“See, Hikaru, when a person receives something they have to give something back in return. And if a person always just gets things, they start to expect it.”

“What's wrong with that? So I'll just keep giving presents.”

Big teardrops spilled from the corners of her eyes. The man sitting next to our table glared at me. I glared back at him. He lowered his gaze.

“Listen, Hikaru, we're not hosts. Even if a girl doesn't spend money on us, if we like her, then we'll hang out together. So, no more presents. Got it?”

Hikaru's expression suddenly brightened and she smiled through her tears. Intense girl.

“Hey, could you say that last part again?”

“So, no more pres—”

“Not that part, what you said before that.”

There was nothing I could do so I repeated myself.

“If we like her, then we’ll hang out together. So stop crying.”

A smile like the summer sky after a rainstorm returned to her face.

We left Mickey D’s. While waiting for the light to change at the diagonal crossing in front of the station, Hikaru, standing at my side, all the while looking straight down, said, “Mako? Even if it’s somebody’s birthday, or something special happens, or something like that, I still can’t give anyone a present?”

“Hmm... Oh well. I guess in those cases it’d be ok.”

When the light turned green Hikaru suddenly ran forward. Both arms flung outward, posed like an airplane. Dodging through the crowd, she whirled about right and left. I watched her in surprise. When she reached the far side of the street she turned back to me and, making a megaphone with her hands, shouted.

“You’re the best, Mako! Let’s get together again tomorrow!”

* * *

Going to karaoke, clubs, or arcades, fighting, stealing CDs or clothes, calling random international phone numbers on stolen cell phones, calling out and laughing at men using telephone club dating services. Our fun was senseless. Why did we think it was so fun at the time? It still seems a little strange to me. But good times never last.

In the first week of August, that infamous series of attempted strangulations of high school girls took place. The magazines and TV called it the Ikebukuro Strangler (using the word “Strangler” in English) or something like that and it was a really popular story, so you probably all still remember it. The first victim was a second year student from a Tokyo metropolitan high school. She was found unconscious at the love

hotel “Espers” in Ikebukuro’s second block. The girl was forced to drink some kind of drug, was choked with a rope, then raped. The next incident was about two weeks later, a girl who had just quit high school, found in the same way, unconscious, at the east gate hotel “2200” on the other side of the station. Both of them regained consciousness soon after reaching the hospital, but they both adamantly refused to say anything about the perpetrator. It seems they were badly threatened by the Strangler. The streets of Ikebukuro were flowing with uniformed patrols and ugly street clothes. Quite the nuisance for us.

Meanwhile, some weekly magazine did an investigation into the school girls’ behavior and exposed what they found. The title was “The Pitfalls of Schoolgirl Prostitution.” Their classmates talked about rumors of them selling themselves, people who knew them from around town disclosed the girls’ prices, and neighborhood housewives happily discussed the girls’ broken homes. The list of brand-name goods the two bought with the money they had saved from hooking was that issue’s top feature. After that it appeared that any form of mass communication was free to write whatever they wanted, and thus began the horrendous slander. For a special fee they would let their sadistic clients choke them. The reasonable price for necrophilia play. On television S&M commentators explained about S&M play that could be practiced safely in the home.

* * *

Around the time the Strangler was causing a stir, Rika and Hikaru also started acting weird. Although they had been arguing about something, as soon as we got there suddenly they pretended to be the best of friends or they left the karaoke box in the

middle of the night and never came back. I thought it was something between girls so I just left it alone.

One Sunday afternoon the four of us, minus Hikaru, gathered together as always at a bench in West Gate Park. Hikaru was at a classical concert at the Art Space that she had promised to go to with her father several months earlier. We were going to meet up with her later.

Masa painstakingly checked his hairstyle and Shun quietly drew in his sketchbook. Just like any other Sunday. After fixing her make-up Rika came over to where I was sitting.

“Hey Mako, I need to talk to you about something...”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Here’s kinda...”

“What, something you can only talk about with Makoto?” cut in Masa from the side.

“That’s right. It’s important, so I won’t let you in on it.”

“Fine, fine, whatever. Everyone’s always like ‘Mako! Mako!’ I’m just about sick of it.”

Shun apparently saw something and stood up, waving his hand.

“Hey! Over here! Over here!”

We could make out Hikaru in the middle of the long line of people coming down the escalator from the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space building. A deep blue bare-shouldered dress. The kind of thing you’d wear to a party after a wedding. It sparkled like the sapphire piercing in Masa’s ear. Hikaru was beautiful with her hair up, but

something was strange about her. She was walking stilted, like a puppet. Hikaru cut her way unsteadily through the throng of dressed-up people in front of the theater and came straight toward us. Without a word, she squatted down in front of the bench. She looked pale. The blood had left her bare shoulders, leaving them a bluish gray. Hikaru threw up a little right there. The clear spittle traced lines on the pavement.

“Hikaru, you ok?”

We sat Hikaru down on the bench. Rika rubbed her back.

“Hey Shun, go buy some warm coffee for her.”

“What’s wrong? Are you ok, Hikaru?” Rika looked helpless.

Hikaru was breathing raggedly, but after a while she spoke.

“I’m ok now. During the encore, they played a song I hate. It made me feel sick.”

“What song was it?” Shun asked as he handed over a paper cup filled with coffee.

“Thanks. Tchaikovsky’s ‘Serenade for Strings.’

It was then that I realized Hikaru was truly born among the elite. She lived in a completely different world.

“Ah! Hikaru’s father!”

We all turned to look at what Rika was looking at. There stood a tall man. A dark suit with a silver tie. Frameless glasses. His hair was half white. I thought he looked like a newscaster from some show. The area around his eyes looked strikingly like Hikaru. Her father nodded to us with his chin, then disappeared in the direction of Theater Street.

Once Hikaru had calmed down I asked Rika, “Oh, Rika, what’d you wanna talk to me about?”

“Ah, well, Hikaru doesn’t seem to be doing so well, so let’s just talk next time.”

“Is that alright?”

“Yea, it’s fine, it’s fine,” Rika said, laughing. But it wasn’t fine. I remember that smile clearly. I should have forced her to tell me then. Because after that, what she wanted to tell me was lost forever.

* * *

One night the following week as I was watching over the store, my PHS rang.

“Hello, Makoto? This is Masa. Something really bad has happened—” Masa’s voice cut out partway, then there was the sound of people noisily struggling with each other for the phone.

“Hey, this is Yoshioka. This evening the body of Rika Nakamura was found. Can you come to the Ikebukuro Police Station immediately? I need to ask you some things.”

“Alright, I’ll be there in a minute.”

“By the way, what were you doing all day today?”

“I was watching the store all day. Am I a suspect?”

“No, but I just thought ‘what if’.” That’s right. That ‘what if’ just happened to Rika. Anything is possible.

“And don’t go telling anybody about this incident.”

“Got it. Be there in five.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I hung up the phone. I went up to the second floor and called out to my mom who was watching TV. I’m going out for a bit. As I jumped down the stairs my mom’s voice followed after me. Are you staying out all night tonight, too? On the news show a

female reporter was walking fearfully about the love hotel area around Ikebukuro's west gate. The area directly behind our house.

* * *

The Ikebukuro Police Station is behind the Art Space, next to the Hotel Metropolitan. I ran through the streets of Ikebukuro's night, filled with drunks and couples. Ignoring the light, I ran straight across the main road, three lanes going each way. I didn't think about Rika. This was the first time I had run since gym class. Still, the muscles in my legs moved with ease. The night wind caressed the front of my body.

Upon reaching the Ikebukuro Police Station I ran up the stairs to the side of the entrance. I gave them Yoshioka's name at the reception desk for the Youth Division. That night the floor was packed. Most likely it was because of the incident with Rika. Toward the back, Yoshioka stood up from behind a desk near the window and raised his hand to me. Next to the desk was a folding chair, and sitting in it was Masa. When his eyes met mine it looked like he was about to cry.

Yoshioka walked up to me slowly. He didn't take his eyes off me.

"Hey, sorry to spring this on you so suddenly, Makoto."

"Whatever. What happened to Rika?"

"Come with me."

Yoshioka started walking ahead of me. He was short. Thin, greasy hair and tanned skin. Dandruff covered the shoulders of his cheap-looking suit. I followed him silently. A row of interrogation room doors was in one corner of the same floor and I was directed into the farthest room in the back. The interrogation room that the G-boys call "Big Booth." You can't see the inside of Big Booth unless you do something pretty

bad. That's what they said. I sat down across the desk from Yoshioka, the wall in front of me being a mirror from waist-up.

"Starting right now everything you say will be recorded as evidence. Remember as best you can and tell it to me straight, got it, Makoto?"

It wasn't his normal voice. He wasn't talking to me, but to someone behind the mirror. He asked me everything I did all day. When did you wake up in the morning? What did you have for lunch? What did you watch on TV while you were eating lunch? What did Tamori do on TV? From when to when were you watching the store? Did anybody you know come to the store? How many melons did you sell today? I told him honestly as much as I could remember. The Yoshioka that night wasn't the Yoshioka I knew. It had been five years since, at thirteen, I crushed in a classmate's cheekbone. I was used to Yoshioka's interrogations. He knew that I was used to them, too. The guys behind the mirror didn't know that.

"When was the last time you met Rika Nakamura?"

"This past Sunday."

"Did you notice anything different about her?"

"No, nothing." I'm not sure why, but I left out the part about Rika wanting to talk to me about something. That was like stepping on a landmine.

"Isn't it true that Rika said she had something in particular to discuss with only you?"

"Yea, now that you mention it, she did." Masa. Oh well. I said that Hikaru was feeling sick so I never got a chance to hear it. It was as if Yoshioka didn't believe me. For almost the next hour, our conversation danced around what Rika wanted to say. I

repeated the same story forty or fifty times. When he saw that my story didn't change no matter how many times I repeated myself, Yoshioka got up from his chair and left the room. Two hours had passed since the interrogation started. Yoshioka came back into the room soon.

“I guess that's all. You can go.”

“Wait a second. I answered everything you asked me. But I still haven't heard anything about Rika. You could do your part and tell me a little, too.”

Yoshioka made a sour face. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and yelled, “You little shit! Don't let yourself get carried away! This is murder! Like I'd tell anything to a punk like you!”

His spit and cigarette-smelling breath flew into my face. Suddenly he lowered his voice so only I could hear him.

“Idiot, are you trying to spoil my act? Play along for a little longer. I'll tell you later.”

“I'm really sorry, detective,” I said in the loudest voice I could manage.

“I guess I'll let it slide. Wait for me at my desk.”

When I left Big Booth Yoshioka patted me on the shoulder. It was a little stronger than usual, but I apologized, saying I'm sorry one more time in a loud voice.

* * *

When I got to Yoshioka's desk, Masa was already gone. It was past midnight and people were sparse. Yoshioka came about fifteen minutes later.

“Makoto, what am I going to do with you? Did you want to hear the whole story right there in front of headquarters' entire investigation team? Since this case is going to

be plastered all over tomorrow's paper, they're handling it with the utmost secrecy, friggin' amateur."

"I'm really sorry, detective," I said again in a loud voice.

Yoshioka gave a wry smile.

"Well, I guess as long as you keep up that attitude. I'll bet you're hungry. I'll buy you ramen or something. Come on."

We left the police station and went to a Hakata ramen shop behind West Gate Park. Even after the last train the shop was still full of people. Greasy tables, greasy chairs, greasy air. We ordered ramen, dumplings, and beer. There were two cups.

"Want a drink?" he asked me. I shook my head and he filled his own cup and drank it down in one gulp.

"Instead, tell me about Rika."

"Just hold your horses."

Yoshioka pulled out a black notebook and, flipping the cover up so I couldn't see in it, he began reading: "Today, 6:20 PM, Ikebukuro's second block area, the hotel 'Knocking On A Heavens Door' – how come these sex hotels always use that kind of swanky name recently? – room number 602, Rika Nakamura of Kawaguchi City, Saitama Prefecture, sixteen, was found dead. She was discovered by a part-time cleaning lady at the hotel. The exact details will have to wait for the official autopsy, but the cause of death was most likely strangulation. Marks from what looked like a rope were left on her neck. The police are currently making every effort to find the whereabouts of the young man Rika Nakamura went into the hotel with at 4:03 PM."

The ramen arrived. Yoshioka slurped the cloudy white soup as if it were tasty. I broke my chopsticks apart, but I had absolutely no appetite and couldn't eat a single bite.

“So, the murderer was the Strangler?”

“We don't know that, but there is a fairly good chance.”

“There's no video or anything?”

“If we could catch criminals easily with cameras, we'd have them plastered all over the city. It'd sure make our job easier. But the Strangler makes sure that he himself is in the camera's blind spot when he passes through the front of the hotel. I can't help thinking about how many times he must have gone over all these dirty hotels. He knows the love hotels in Ikebukuro and he thinks fast.”

I watched Yoshioka stuff ramen and dumplings into his stomach. It was around then that I remembered Rika's smile. The inviting pose.

“Well, don't think too hard about it. But if you happen to remember anything else, contact me anytime. You have my cell phone number, right?”

“Yeah.”

Yoshioka drank what was left of the last glass of beer.

“I have to go spend the rest of the night writing the report. Unbelievable.”

I was staring hard at the empty cup in front of me.

“Oh, and Makoto, don't you guys even think about doing something on your own. This pervert is the police's prey.”

* * *

The next day the four of us gathered together at the bench in West Gate Park. To go to Rika's funeral. We went by JR from Ikebukuro to Kawaguchi. From the station at Kawaguchi we took a taxi. This was the first time for any of us to go to Rika's house. As the taxi approached her house we started seeing people in black clothes. The area was made up of laid-back subdivided houses. We got out of the taxi at the entrance to a dead end street. Both sides of the street were lined with white matchboxes houses. Every house had the same kind of red flower. But the front of Rika's house was jammed with police, TV cameras, and reporters. The people in mourning dress were waiting, turning their faces away from the spotlights. We went to the end of the line. It was my first funeral. I was too small when my dad died, so I don't remember a thing. Next to the front door we wrote our names and handed over our condolence money, and copying the actions of the people in front of us, we were back outside again before we knew it. It was all too fast. All I could remember was Rika's father, mother, and little sister huddled together, looking small. In just one night they had black circles under their eyes and their faces looked as if they had lost weight. The kind of faces found on people whose shock was so great that they didn't even cry. And the photograph of Rika (which she never would have picked out for herself), surrounded floor to ceiling in white flowers. It might have been a picture from when she first entered high school. She was smiling innocently, her white face yet to be darkened at the tanning salon. What was Rika like at home? I couldn't even imagine.

The summer afternoon sun was blinding when we got outside. We left Rika's house among the crying from her classmates. Hikaru cried silently while walking. We stopped a taxi and took it back to Kawaguchi Station. As we came up the overpass, the

windows of the air-conditioned taxi were filled with thunderheads. The upper parts shone white where the sun was hitting them. Rika would never see storm clouds again. One question kept spinning around and around in my head.

What can I do for Rika...what can I do for Rika...what can I do for Rika...

* * *

We split up at Kawaguchi Station in front of the ticket gate. All of us had little to say. Masa and Shun passed through the gate and went down to the platform. Hikaru was dragging. I wanted to be alone.

“You too, go on.”

“I have something I want to talk about though...”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Even if it’s about Rika?”

I couldn’t say no if it was about Rika. Hikaru and I went to a family restaurant near the station. We sat in hard vinyl chairs. Hikaru said: “At some point it will probably come out on TV or in some magazine, so I’ll tell you first, ok. You see...Rika...sometimes she had a kinda part-time job. I want Masa and Shun to hear about it from you, Mako, ‘k?”

“You mean hooking?”

“But she said she didn’t go all the way. She found customers using like telephone clubs and stuff and went to karaoke or couples cafes with them, but she said she only went as far as second base.”

“But this time...”

“Maybe she needed the money, so she went all the way.”

The cup of iced coffee that I hadn't touched was heavy with sweat.

"Hikaru, did you hear about anything that was bothering Rika? She told me last Sunday that she had something to talk to me about, but that's where it stopped."

"Maybe it was about..." Hikaru furrowed her eyebrows.

"It's ok, tell me."

"Well, it might sound a little strange, but Rika said she had this customer who was really loose with his money. She called him 'sensei.' Because she said she was scared, I walked with her to the place they were going to meet sometimes."

"Do you remember his face?"

"Yes."

I called Shun on my PHS. He was still in Ikebukuro. I told him to bring his sketchbook and pencils and come back to Kawaguchi.

I had an idea of something I could do for Rika.

* * *

Shun said that this was the first time he'd ever drawn a likeness by description only. I asked Hikaru about the sensei's features, and Shun drew a little, then showed it to Hikaru to confirm. The whole process moved along a little bit at a time. At some point it had become night outside the windows of the family restaurant. It took three hours to somehow finish a picture that Hikaru was satisfied with. In the drawing was a man with his hair parted down the middle. A spoiled rich boy. Sharp-jawed, slim and handsome. I thought he probably got good grades in school.

"Sorry to ask this, Shun, but could you make about a hundred copies of this at the convenience store over there?"

As Shun dashed out of the family restaurant, I called up the GK on my PHS.

* * *

GK doesn't stand for goalkeeper. It means the G-boys' king. His name is Takashi Yasufuji. Takashi is the head that binds all the gang boys in Ikebukuro together, and the king of all the teams. How did he do it, you ask? With fist and brain. The two most famous kids at the high school I went to were "Doberman-killer Yamai" and "Carl Yasufuji." Carl is Carl Lewis's Carl. Yamai was strong because he was huge, physically strong, and tough. Takashi was strong because he was lithe, fast, and precise. He was about 175 centimeters tall. He was about ten centimeters shorter than Yamai, and he was a lightweight. But his arms and legs were knit like a tightly wound wire rope. I once saw Takashi catch a glass with the sleeve of his jacket and knock it from the table at a club in Ikebukuro. He noticed it while he was talking about something with one of his friends and instantly his hand was there under the table. When his hand appeared back on top of the table, he was gripping the glass. Not one drop of his drink had spilled. Not only that, but the hand that held the glass was the same one that had knocked over the drink. His speed was like sorcery. After that I went over to him and started a conversation. He said that since he was born he had never let anything fall on the ground. He said he could catch anything before it got that far.

Yamai and Takashi's man-to-man was in the summer of our third year of high school. Everyone around who knew they were the strongest of the strong wanted to find out which one was stronger before we graduated, so we encouraged them. In so doing, oddly enough, little by little the two of them began feeling that this was something they had to do. It was a lot of trouble for the two of them. One day Yamai came to me

requesting I set up a meeting. He said he had no other friends that he could trust to ask. I didn't think of myself as one of his friends, but since it's hard for me to say no to a guy who shyly begs a favor, I did as asked.

The following Sunday, the showdown of the century began in the gym, locked up tight. The spectator seats were full, even the guys that had dropped out of school came to see the show. Betting odds were sixty-forty, Yamai's favor. Takashi was moving left around Yamai, drawing a circle within the center circle of the wood plank basketball court, while taking small rapid punches. The muscles in his back stretched cleanly and, like some spring-loaded device, only his arms thrust outward then bounced back. Three sharp punches, four sharp punches, in the same way, in the same spot. Yamai tried hard to somehow grab ahold of Takashi, but there were wings on Takashi's legs. Every once in a while one of Yamai's whirling rain of fists grazed him. But even then, without changing his expression and without overcompensating in the least, he constantly hit Yamai in the same way, with precise, fast punches. When I saw that, I knew how the fight was going to end.

Takashi's punches shaved off a bit more of Yamai's power and stamina each time they landed. Yamai was a monster, tough. Even suffering a hail of punches he kept going forward, forward. But the one standing after fifteen minutes was Takashi. Although Takashi's last line was: "I never want to fight you ever again."

* * *

"Hello?" Takashi's leisurely voice flowed from my PHS.

"It's me, Makoto. Can you get the heads of all the teams together for me tonight?"

“Is this about that girl who was with you?” As always, right to the punch.

“That’s right, I wanna do what I can for her. I have a good lead.”

“The Strangler...”

There was a short pause. I listened to the noise from the street coming through the PHS.

“Sure, let’s meet tonight at 9:00 in the lobby of the Hotel Metropolitan. I’ll assemble the rest of them.”

The phone hung up on Takashi’s end. I nodded at Hikaru, who was looking in my direction with concern.

* * *

The lobby of the Hotel Metropolitan was empty at night. All eyes of the hotel workers were fixed on one corner of a couch in the lobby. Four were heads of the G-boys, one more leader each for the boarders, the BMX teams, the singers, and the dancers, and me and Takashi. Once we were all there we took the elevator up to a conference room that Takashi had reserved.

Ten punks all with their own unique and flashy style, sitting back in black leather chairs, the kind that executives use. Quite a sight. Nobody spoke a word. Takashi opened the meeting.

“We just had a regular meeting last week, so sorry for calling all of you together so suddenly. I had you all come today to discuss the Strangler. The one who summoned you all here was Makoto Majima over there. I believe you are all familiar with him. Also with the fact that a girl in his team was killed yesterday. Ok Makoto, you take it from here.”

I talked about Rika. About Yoshioka's information and Rika's part-time job. And about the sensei that Hikaru saw. I took out the stack of copied drawings and passed them out to the members.

“With this meeting I want you to start up a guard system. A twenty-four hour patrol and hotel and telephone club stakeout. And I want all the various Boys & Girls in Ikebukuro to carry a copy of this picture. Two girls almost dead, one girl killed. I think it's about time that we started getting serious, for these streets and for ourselves.”

“What's the guarantee that the Strangler's gonna strike again?” said one of the skinhead G-boys.

“I don't know. But in the last month there have been three incidents. I'm certain that he'll move again in the near future.”

“Do you have any proof that this 'sensei' is the Strangler? He might just be some old lech,” said the singers' leader, his long hair breaded up like an Indian.

“There is that chance. But this is the only thread of information I've managed to pull in. It's worth a try. Besides, we're not the police. We can use any means we want to make him talk. There's no way even the Strangler can get past us by pretending not to know anything.”

One by one they gave their opinions in order. The rule for these meetings was that each person absolutely must speak. Takashi spoke last.

“Alright, I've heard what you have to say. We will enter preparations for an A-class guard for the next month. I'd like each team to produce guardians for four rotations over twenty-four hours. Love hotel districts, telephone clubs, and couples cafes. Make sure there are guardians watching over all these places. And make every

kid in Ikebukuro walk around with three of these pictures. Tell them to keep special watch for couples far apart in age, with this ‘sensei’ as the prime target. Got it? This time it’s our turn to hunt the Strangler.”

* * *

Starting the day after Rika’s funeral, the streets of Ikebukuro became a combat zone. The police and G-boys were bloodthirsty. The newspapers and television caused a sensation by reporting that the criminal series of attempted strangulations had given rise to the first victim. It looked like they were having a field day with the story. Good for business. I became the coordinator for the Strangler hunt. I gave out assignments to the people on patrol and received communications from each team. Also, once every three days I’d do the rounds of Ikebukuro’s jungle for six hours with Masa and Shun, and when it was convenient for her, Hikaru. I carried around five untraceable cell phones that I got from Takashi, and they were constantly ringing. That was the first time in my life I had experienced exhaustion from just thinking.

* * *

After that a week passed quickly. We continued to strike out with little strong information. Only a few couples made up of schoolgirls and old men fueling the sugar daddy business got caught in our net. However, not one of Ikebukuro’s Boys & Girls-turned-guardian complained. I started seeing young kids around town wearing T-shirts with a black and white print of Rika. Below Rika’s aggressive face, glaring straight ahead, piercing the hair that fell in her eyes from the explosive wave-perm on her head, the words “REMEMBER R” in red letters like blood. I bought the same T-shirt from a Colombian working a street stall on Sunshine Avenue and put it on.

* * *

During a break from our patrol, when me, Masa, and Shun were resting on a bench in West Gate Park, two guys came up to us. One had a notepad and a tasteless black shoulder bag. The other one had a camera with a huge flash attached to it and a camera bag. Wiping the dripping sweat from the nape of his neck, the fat notepad spoke up.

“Hello, you guys wouldn’t happen to know the Rika Nakamura that was killed, would you?”

We exchanged glances amongst ourselves. Masa’s eyes got narrow. Dangerous.

“Nah, who’s that?”

I played along.

“That girl that was murdered by the Strangler. You know her, right? She was selling herself or whatever. Sucks to be her, getting killed and all because she sold her body just to get money for brand name clothes or bags or something.”

“Oh, that’s right. Did you guys figure anything out?”

“No, this girl is different than the last two because her friends aren’t saying anything. Well, there has been some questioning about her involvement in organized prostitution...”

Rika? Organized prostitution? I didn’t know what to think. Right as I was about to ask him a little more, Masa abruptly punched Notepad. Shun spit on the camera then sprayed tear gas at the cameraman.

“Screw you! If you write a bunch of lies about Rika I’ll kill you!” screamed Masa.

We ran out of West Gate Park before people had a chance to start gathering.

* * *

After that another two weeks. Since no one had seen the Strangler, the jumper of the G-boys couldn't contain themselves any longer, and they turned to hunting older men. Aiming at couples with vastly different ages. Well, I guess it couldn't be helped. You reap what you sow. Yoshioka put a call in to my PHS. You're not up to something are you? The streets are dangerous. I said I know nothing, I'm doing nothing. Yoshioka told me to hand the prey over to the police, without fail, then hung up.

It was around that time, during a late-night patrol. The three of us were just blowing around the love hotel district. A G-boy was sitting on the guardrail in front of a convenience store talking with someone on a cell phone. A guardian. He confirmed it with eye contact and I nodded back slightly. Just like that, we turned down a narrow street lined on both sides with love hotels. Dimly lit. Everywhere a green vacancy sign. Two women were standing in the circle of light from a streetlamp. Almost-illegal miniskirts. From far away they looked like young girls, but close up, make-up hiding deep lines. The kind of faces you usually see on women in their late-thirties through to fifty. Both of them saw the Rika T-shirt I was wearing.

“Good luck, you guys. Go get ‘im for that girl.”

I gave them a copy of the picture Shun drew. Since the happening with Rika, it seemed that subtle bonds were born on the streets of Ikebukuro between people who had had no ties at all till now.

* * *

It was nearing the end of the one month guardian operation, the fourth weekend. The patrols and watchdogs continued on like a machine. When the G-boys decide to do something, they do it. We were on duty that night until dawn, so the four of us had dinner a little after eight at the West Gate McDonald's. Lots of Big Macs, fries, and sodas. All the seats in the place were full, so the cigarette smoke made the far side of the room seem as if it were in a haze. It was Saturday night, and the mass of people we looked down on from the window looked like they were having a little more fun than usual. One of the cell phones rang inside my backpack. Hikaru sprang on the bag and got the phone out. Bingo on the second try. She handed it over to me.

“This is Makoto.”

“Makoto, this is Killer Zoo's Yoshikazu. Right now I'm in front of the couples café 'Mezzo Piano', behind Marui. A man that looked exactly like the sensei just went in with a young girl.”

“Got it. Stay where you are. We'll be there in five.” I hung up the phone, then said to everybody, “Let's get to the couples café 'Mezzo Piano'.”

* * *

From the McDonald's in front of the West Gate rotary to Marui at the West Gate five-way intersection, walking fast, three minutes. If you pass by Marui and turn at the second small alley, you'll see a group of pubs. The couples café 'Mezzo Piano' is in a building filled with various businesses, narrow like a pencil, on the left-hand side of that street. There's no sign or anything. If you didn't know about it, you'd probably walk right past it. In front of the slightly dirty elevator facing the street was a fourteen or fifteen year-old, short G-boy. Baggy jeans hung from his hips and he practically swam

inside a huge Utah Jazz uniform. I gave him a thumbs-up and then greeted him: “Yo, good job. How long ago did he go in?”

“I think it’s been less than ten minutes.”

“How did you know he went to ‘Mezzo Piano’?”

“The elevator went up to the sixth floor, then it came back empty.”

“Are there any other exits besides the elevator in this building?”

“There are emergency stairs, but no matter how you get out, you have to pass in front of this entranceway,” Yoshikazu answered spiritedly. Smart boy.

“You’ve done great. I’ll be sure to tell both the head of Killer Zoo and Takashi about you.”

What should I do? I looked at Hikaru. She nodded.

“Right now Hikaru and I are going to go into the café and make sure it’s the sensei. Call Takashi and inform him that we’re keeping a close eye on the guy. After that, just do whatever Takashi tells you to. Good?”

I looked Masa and Shun straight in the eyes. Shun nodded. Masa looked like he wasn’t entirely satisfied, but in the end he nodded.

* * *

The elevator doors opened at the sixth floor to a tight hallway, and directly in front of us was a gray steel door with a plastic plate hanging from it that read ‘Mezzo Piano’. The same kind of door you’d find to a regular apartment. Not much like a business. I pulled open the door.

Compared with the fluorescent lights in the hallway, the inside was dimly lit. A small space, maybe three *tatami* mats wide, cut into sections by curtains. To the right

was a counter, and behind that a middle-aged man with a black bowtie and thin moustache. Our eyes met.

“Come in. Welcome.”

A sickeningly smooth voice. Hikaru and I set foot in the store.

“This way, please.”

Thin Moustache led the way. Passing through a black curtain, we headed for the back of the room; it was long and rectangular, and within the roughly eight mats of space there were six red velvet couches facing each other in pairs over small tables. Since my eyes had yet to grow accustomed to the dark, all I could see was the vague outline of people. When we entered the room, all the couples stopped moving. The last empty seats were in the corner in front of us. We sat down there. Thin Moustache lit up a menu with a pencil light and Hikaru ordered.

“Oolong tea.”

“Make that two,” I said.

“I’ll bring them shortly. Thank you.”

When Thin Moustache lifted up the curtain and left the room, the couple next to us, who looked like a businessman in his late-twenties and an OL, was the first to start moving. The girl got on her knees between the man’s legs and put his penis in her mouth. She purposefully made noise. The man reached out to the tight skirt of the girl who was sticking her ass out and rolled it up. The OL wasn’t wearing anything underneath. In order to show the middle-aged couple directly in front of them, she shook her hips up and down slightly. Hikaru put her arms around my shoulders and, after putting her tongue inside my ear, whispered to me. Goosebumps.

“Mako, it’ll look even weirder if we don’t do anything. I’m ok with it, so don’t worry.” After saying that, Hikaru took my right hand and pressed it into her breast through her halter-top. No bra. Soft balloons filled with hot liquid, sticky like pulp. Grasping it felt like something was going to come spilling out between my fingers. I got hard.

I looked around the room while feeling up Hikaru’s breasts. In front of us was a plain couple, an older man with thinning hair and what appeared to be his wife, eyes wide. Pass on that couple. Pass also to the businessman and OL, as well as the middle-aged couple across from them that looked like they knew what they were doing. That left the two couples in the back. At a couples café, as long as you don’t make eye contact, it seems you can look at each other as much as you want (or at least that’s what everyone was doing), so it was very convenient for me. The sofa in the farthest corner diagonally and across from us had two school kids in jeans, stuck together like clams. Before long they stripped off their jeans, then their underwear. Still wearing their white socks. Strange. And last, in the same line with us there was one sofa, and he was there. He had the girl up in a pose like she was pissing, and he was rubbing her clitoris from behind. She was young, maybe at the end of her teens. Ah, ah, ah! The man whipped his neck around like an owl, casting his eyes all about his surroundings. His hair was parted down the middle, he was thinner than Shun’s picture, and he had a seemingly sharp face. He was the sensei. I put my lips up to Hikaru’s ear and whispered. She let out a sigh.

“Look at the couple on the farthest couch on our side.”

Hikaru nodded, still flushed. Without changing her position she bent forward and put her head on my thigh, and she looked at the far sofa as if leaning over. Her hand continued to stroke my bulging zipper. After a while Hikaru put her arms around my neck again and said into my ear: “No doubt about it, that man is the sensei.”

* * *

After that we faked at playing with each other a little while more, then Hikaru and I left the shop. We paid at the counter. Three couples sat in chairs lined up in front of the counter waiting for the next available seat inside. In the elevator, Hikaru said that she could get into the habit of doing this. Let’s come again. When we got off the elevator there was no one in front of the building. I couldn’t even see anyone that looked like a guardian. I quickly called Takashi on my PHS.

“Takashi? It’s definitely the sensei. We confirmed it. What do we do from here?”

“First, send the girl home. I’ve prepared several cars and scooters, and they currently have the building surrounded. Makoto, it’s not ‘what do we do from here.’ What do *you* want to do?”

Takashi isn’t called the king of the G-boys for show. He has the power to read a person’s heart. That’s the biggest difference between him and Yamai.

“I want to make sure whether he’s the Strangler or not directly. It might get a little rough though. I’d like to ask for enough backup so that he can’t get away.”

“Alright, go on Makoto. Go bag yourself a Strangler.”

* * *

I told her I’d call her later, then sent Hikaru home. Don’t be reckless she told me worriedly, and she faded off in the direction of the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space

building. I crossed the street, sat on the guardrail opposite the building, and waited for the sensei. Waiting wasn't hard at all.

REMEMBER R.

Another thirty minutes, and it was past ten at night. The doors to the elevator opened yet again, and the sensei appeared in the entrance of the building with his arm around the shoulders of the young girl. A whitish suit with no tie. On his shoulder, a coach's bag. The girl's legs were very unsteady and he held her up while they walked. He checked behind him to make sure no one was following. I went into action too. I crossed the intersection in front of Marui, heading toward the Art Space. The boarders and BMX teams were performing impressive stunts as usual in the area in front of the Space, the same as any other Saturday night. The sensei was squeezing himself through the crowd and heading for the love hotels behind West Gate Park. The two of them passed out of the park, then went down a narrow alley beside the Art Space. The area was deserted. At the end of the alley were two love hotels. Service time starting at 4000 yen.

Speeding up, I walked past them and stood in front of the love hotel. The sensei's eyes and my eyes met. He had a handsome face, like an actor's. A young mid-thirties. Like a professor at some good women's college. He was surprisingly small. Maybe just about 170 centimeters.

“What are you supposed to be?”

“Nobody, I just want to find out if you're the Strangler or not,” I said, and immediately he started panicking. Swimming eyes.

“What are you talking about. I’m just on a date with my girlfriend. I’ll call out if you’re trying to rob me.”

The girl’s eyes were watery and distant and her gaze was wandering around the night sky.

“Call out if you want. But if you’re not going to, let me have a look in that bag.”

He suddenly pushed the girl. She sank straight down to the asphalt and didn’t come back up. The guy pulled something shiny out of the pocket of his bag and pointed it at me. A small blade. It was like a scalpel. The sensei was almost crying.

“Go on, quick, get out of here. If you don’t move fast I’ll stab you.”

“If you want to do it, do it. But there’s no way you can escape. This place is completely surrounded.”

“You’re lying.”

Trembling scalpel in a back alley.

“Nope, even right behind you.”

Keeping the scalpel on me, he took a quick glance behind him. I dropped my backpack from my shoulder and, grabbing the strap, I brought it down on his right hand. Small and quick. Inside the backpack were the five cell phones for communication with the G-boys and my PHS. With the first hit the scalpel went flying, and next I aimed for the head. Two times, three times, four times. I kept on whipping my backpack around. He covered his head and fell to the ground.

“Nice work.”

The voice came from behind me. I raised my backpack up and spun around. Takashi stood with his arms crossed. He was smiling slightly.

“Hunph–”

Facing back around on hearing the sensei’s cry, the guys in Takashi’s team had just finished up kicking him to the ground. The sensei was laid out face down, and around both wrists and ankles they were running a circular plastic cord. They pulled it tight and when it stopped with a snap, he couldn’t move at all.

“Made in America. Works pretty well, huh?” said Takashi. I picked up the sensei’s bag from the side of the road. I opened the flap. A hemp rope, surgical gloves, a small bottle with some thick, clear liquid, two vibrators, another scalpel, a Polaroid camera, a stopwatch. Takashi looked at me and shook his head.

“Stop, don’t look through there! Those are my personal belongings! Who the hell are you people? You’re not cops, right? Do you think you can do this to me and get away with it?” the man yelled from the ground, wriggling around restlessly like a caterpillar.

Takashi picked up the fallen scalpel from the ground. He walked toward the man. The boys in his team all stepped back.

“Are you familiar with the movie ‘Chinatown’? Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. That was a great movie, wasn’t it? I only saw it on video though.”

Takashi squatted down next to the sensei, grabbed him by the hair, and pulled his head up. He looked hard into the sensei’s eyes.

“Yeah, I know it. Directed by Roman Polanski. What the hell are you going to do?”

The sensei lost to the strength in Takashi’s eyes and turned his gaze away.

“If you tell us everything, I won’t do anything. You’re the Ikebukuro Strangler, right? Well?”

Takashi put the tip of the scalpel into the sensei’s left nostril.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I don’t want to say anything about that. I ought to have the right to remain silent.”

Takashi pulled the scalpel toward him. A *psht* sound, like cutting through thick plastic. The sensei’s nostril was cut and blood flowed from the wound. Raising an incomprehensible cry, his teeth and gums were stained red. Red froth mixed with saliva fell on the asphalt.

“This scalpel cuts pretty well. You don’t have the right to remain silent, or any rights. I’ll ask you again. You’re the Strangler?”

This time he put the scalpel in the right nostril. Tears came to the sensei’s eyes.

“Ok, ok, don’t cut anymore. That’s right, I did it.”

“Did you kill Rika, too?” I asked him.

“Answer him.” Takashi pushed the scalpel another two millimeters into his nose.

“No, I didn’t kill anyone. It’s just a game. I measure out the drug precisely and I keep my eye on the stopwatch when I choke them. I wouldn’t do anything as shameless as kill someone.”

Takashi and I exchanged glances.

“Really? Is that the truth?” I squatted down next to him as well.

“That’s right. No matter how much you accuse me, if I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it. More importantly, I need to be taken to a doctor. This’s going to leave a scar on my nose.”

“Can’t do that. Pretty soon the police should be arriving. You can’t run anymore.”

I thought about Rika while listening to Takashi’s voice as he replied. I wonder if he really didn’t do it? Or is he just gambling, hoping that he can get out of this somehow?

“Please stop, I can give you money. Ten million, twenty million, I can raise money like you’ve never seen. I don’t know the girl that died very well.”

“You knew Rika?” I asked.

“Yeah, we had a few dates.”

“Did you choke her, too?”

“Only once. I paid her exactly as promised and there was mutual consent.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. There was a strange glimmer in the man’s eye.

“I won’t let you get away with doing this to me. If I’m caught by the police I’ll give testimony against you. I’ll send you to jail along with me, on account of personal injury.”

The man was drunk on himself. Forgetting even the position he was in. Takashi laughed heartily. As if he were truly enjoying himself.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you? Just because you’re good at studying. But your luck ran out when your lust tempted you into the jungle. No matter how brilliant your brain is, it’s not going to help a pig like you here. Get what I’m saying?”

The only thing moving on Takashi’s face was his mouth. He wasn’t even looking at the man.

“Enough of this. I’ll hire the best lawyer and be back here before you know it. Then I’ll be sure to take my revenge on you. I’ll hire some *yakuza* to atta—”

Takashi pulled the scalpel and cut the man's remaining nostril. He grabbed ahold of the sensei's hair, then smashed his face into the asphalt. It happened in a split second. Yank, smooch. The sound of a nose disintegrating. The man was crying and screaming something at the same time.

"Let's go, the cops are coming," said Takashi, who then held up his right hand and made a small circle with his forefinger. The G-boys who had been holding back the passers-by on either side of the street all dispersed.

"Come on Makoto, let's go, too."

"Go where?"

I was looking down at the crying man.

"To the club."

"You guys are gonna go drink? Now?"

"You're pretty slow yourself, huh? Us, today we've been drinking at that club since this evening. Right?" Takashi grinned at me.

"Right... Even right now, we're not really here." I smiled back at Takashi.

And so we went back. To the place we naturally belonged, the place where our friends were waiting.

* * *

The club's name was 'Luster Love'. A place with a heavy G-boys influence. A black concrete box plastered with spray-painted graffiti. That night almost the whole place was reserved. All of the heads that were at the meeting were there. The guard system that lasted for almost a month was finally lifted, so it was a celebration. Everybody was drinking rum and dancing to the rhythm of laid-back reggae. Masa and

Shun were there as well. I could hear people giving toasts here and there. But no matter how much I drank, the important parts in my head remained clear. Stopping the Strangler was cause for celebration (we learned that he had been arrested in that alley when someone who had been left to watch what happened reported in to Takashi). However, I couldn't get Rika out of my head. I didn't think that the Strangler was lying. There might be another criminal out there that killed Rika. Could there be another pervert roaming the streets carefree? But if that was the case, it looked like there was nothing I could do about it. I killed time quietly drinking alcohol. I lifted myself up heavily a little past two in the morning, right as the club was just about to go crazy. When I opened the door and was about to step outside, a G-boy came up and told me that Takashi was calling for me. I went to the back of the club where Takashi was surrounded by his flunkies. Our eyes met and Takashi nodded. He beckoned me over with his hand. Deafeningly loud Sly & Robbie. Takashi spoke next to my ear.

“Good job today. Makoto, I'll take you in as one of my execs any time. And there's something else...”

It was unusual, but it looked like Takashi was having trouble saying what he wanted to.

“Watch out for that girl Hikaru. That's all.”

I walked home, crawled under my blanket, and went to sleep. On my way home, this time it was Takashi's “that's all” about Hikaru that kept circling around in my head. I feel like I had a lot of bad dreams that night. Although I don't remember any of them.

* * *

The next day, Sunday, I woke up around noon. The front page of the Society section of the newspaper was an article that read: “Perpetrator of Attempted Strangulations Caught!” I read the newspaper from my bed. Since the thing with Rika, reading the newspaper had become a habit. If I could take a Japanese test now, maybe I could actually get a slightly good score.

It said the Strangler was an anesthesiologist at some university hospital. Thirty-seven years old, single. He was serious at work and one of the promising elite. How could it have been *him*? A conventional story. But it said that the police denied that he killed Rika. Hereafter they planned to take time and complete a thorough investigation.

I went to West Gate Park. I sat on the bench as always. Masa and Shun came, and in the evening Hikaru came as well. I talked about the night before. Everything, except the part about Takashi cutting the Strangler’s nose. It seemed like none of us were satisfied with the way things had gone with Rika, but we were pleased with the fact that we had caught the Strangler ourselves. After that we spent a long time just shooting the shit. The first relaxed Sunday afternoon we had had in a while. No more patrolling.

The evening sun struck the buildings, whose shadows were lengthening. Summer would soon be over. I gazed absently at the round space of West Gate Park. Across the way from our bench was a face I hadn’t seen in a while, “Doberman-killer Yamai.” Yamai pulled out a cell phone and punched in a number. Hikaru was chatting with Masa when her phone rang. Hikaru fished her cell phone out of her black Prada bag.

“Hi, this is Hikaru... What? Hey, don’t call me... If I need something, *I’ll call you.* Hmph.”

Hikaru hung up the phone immediately. At first she had a cute voice, but partway through it sounded like she suddenly lost her temper. While listening to Hikaru's voice, I idly watched Yamai. It looked like his phone call was over, too. It must be a coincidence, I thought. Until I remembered Takashi's "that's all."

That night, since Shun and Masa were going to the "Luster Love" to drink all night, among other things, we split up early. Saying she was bored, Hikaru went home as well. As she was about to leave Hikaru poked me in the chest with her forefinger and said let's go to that café again sometime.

* * *

Before I went home I stopped by the Virgin Megastore under Marui. The first time in my life to visit the classical section. I had never ever listened to classical music. I tried asking a young guy who had his long hair tied up with a rubber band and who was wearing the same polo shirt as the rest of the staff.

"You wouldn't happen to have Tchaikovsky's 'Serenade for Strings', would you?"

The salesman took me over to the 'T' rack. There was tons of Tchaikovsky.

"Karajan, Davis, Barenboim, Mravinsky, which conductor would you like?"

When I told him I didn't care which one, he handed me the Davis, saying that it was the best deal for my money. I paid for it at the register, went home, then popped it in my CD player. I then listened to the song six times in a row that night.

* * *

'Serenade for Strings' was the kind of song that played during ballroom scenes in foreign flicks. A sweet, sad waltz. Young ladies of refined society with their puffy

dresses forming a circle and dancing, dancing. The next day and the day after that, from morning until night I listened to that song and just kept on thinking. Rika, Hikaru, the Strangler, Yamai, organized prostitution. The same words ran circles inside my head a million times. But still, I didn't stop thinking. Rika couldn't think for herself anymore, so it should be ok for me to do it for her.

The third evening I called up Takashi on my PHS.

"I want to know Yamai's cell number, think you can find it for me?"

"Is the sky still blue today too? Don't ask stupid questions."

Takashi called me back in a second and told me Yamai's number. I dialed it right away.

"Hello?"

I heard Yamai's slow voice over the hum of the streets.

"Yo, this is Makoto. I have something to talk to you about. Do you have some time now?"

"Yea."

"Ok, West Gate Park in thirty minutes. See you there?"

"Yea."

The phone went quiet. Talkative guy.

* * *

I sat on a bench and waited for Yamai. It was starting to get dark around me. Businessmen on their way home cut hurriedly across the park, and since it was a weekday, there were only a few G-boys as well. A little after the agreed time I saw Yamai's golden head in the entranceway of the park's Tōbu department store. He found

me and came straight over. Sturdy black engineering boots with camouflage pants and a gray T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off. Many slash marks ran across his wrists. The piercing connecting his nose and ear had changed to gold.

“Yo.”

He sat down next to me.

“Hey.”

“What do you want?”

Yamai’s voice was low. Like a flat rock was rubbing against the back of his throat.

“I want to ask about Hikaru.”

I said it without taking my eyes off him. His expression didn’t change at all.

“You finally figured it out, huh?”

“Figured out what?”

“That that girl is mine.”

“Are you two dating?”

I was surprised.

“No, we’re not going out. But she’s mine.”

“Why?”

“Since I was born, this is the first time I’ve ever met the same kind of person as me. That’s her. We’re not going out like you’re thinking. But that girl is mine. If you try to take her, I’ll kill you Makoto.”

The Doberman-killer and the princess are the same kind of person. Maybe there’s something wrong with his brain?

“I don’t think anyone thinks that you and Hikaru are the same.”

“You guys can’t understand. She doesn’t even see it herself yet. That girl thinks she’s in love with you. Did you know that?”

“I guess,” I answered reluctantly.

“You’re sharp, but a good guy. I’ll say one last thing. I’m not afraid of you, or Takashi, or anything else in this world. Because I found that girl.”

Yamai stood up. He might have grown taller than before. I called out to his back, thick as a door, as he walked away.

“Hey, when you called Hikaru the other day, was it on purpose? So I’d notice?”

“Of course.”

Yamai left. The businessmen in his way parted for him instinctively as he walked past.

* * *

The next Saturday, a little after noon, I met with Hikaru alone. The place was, of course, the bench in West Gate Park. The weather was good. Although it was already September, the summer sun was still shining. Hikaru was wearing the same clothes she had on when I first met her, a black mini-T and black mini-skirt. Hikaru spoke as she practically jumped onto the bench next to me.

“I’m, like, really happy. We can be together, just the two of us. Maybe it’s a little early, but wanna go to that couples café we went to last week?”

Hikaru was cheerful as always. Angelic smile. But it wasn’t the smile that Yamai fell for.

“I think I pretty much figured it out.”

Hikaru was quick to read a person. Her expression suddenly changed.

“What are you talking about?” she responded cautiously.

“About Rika.”

“But the Strangler did that, right?”

“I’m thinking it was a little different.”

“Well then, who was it?”

“You.”

Hikaru froze. There was only a brief pause.

“What are you talking about? I wouldn’t do something like that? Rika was my friend.”

“I believe that, really. But you did it, right?”

Looking deep into my eyes she said, “It wasn’t me.”

I looked even deeper into her eyes. A strange light was wavering.

“That’s why you made Yamai do it.”

It seemed as though Hikaru couldn’t stand it any longer. Her tears spilled out, falling from her large eyes, plop, plop. Still, I continued to stare into her eyes.

“But I only asked him to scare her to death.”

I remembered Hikaru’s tears on the day of Rika’s funeral. Not yet, Hikaru wasn’t showing me rock bottom.

“Is that true, Hikaru, really the truth?”

I never took my eyes off her. I stared with more intensity. Yamai said it, too. I’m a sharp guy.

“If I tell you the truth, I’ll lose everything. You’ll probably hate me, too.”

“If you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll despise you. Talk, Hikaru.”

Hikaru breathed a big sigh. The tears pulled back from both her eyes. She was like a wonderfully skilled actress hearing the word “Cut!” Even her voice changed.

“Okay. I’ll tell you. Rika was unlucky. Around the beginning of summer vacation, she ran into the Strangler while working the streets. Do you remember the week or so when Rika wore a scarf, she was using it to hide the bruises on her neck. After that the Strangler messed up and caused a stir, and Rika got more and more scared. ‘I know him. Maybe I should talk to Makoto?’ she was saying.”

“But you stopped her.”

“Right, because if Rika told you, then you’d find out about me, too.”

“About how you introduce old men to young girls?”

“Yes. I arranged things for all the girls. The school, my parents, the police, they’re nothing. But I just didn’t want you to find out.”

“Why?”

“Because...I...”

Hikaru’s face suddenly changed again. From an actress to a little girl. Her eyes became misty like she had just done drugs. She began to chew on her beautifully manicured thumbnail.

“What is it, what’s wrong, Hikaru?”

“It’s because you’re the first person I ever liked who was younger than papa. I hated it, but I’ve only fallen for men older than him.”

“What was the deal with Tchaikovsky?”

“Papa likes that song. He likes Tchaikovsky, and he would often lock the door and we would listen to it together. “Serenade for Strings: Larghetto elegiaco.” He always pet me and loved me so much. Sometimes it hurt, and sometimes I didn’t like it, but papa said it’s what people do when they love each other.”

The same kind of person, just like Yamai said. Yamai’s dad was notorious around our neighborhood for being an alcoholic, and with or without reason he would lay into Yamai and his mother. One time in winter Yamai spent the night under our store awning to get out of the rain. One morning on my way to elementary school I saw the two of them huddled together sleeping under a railroad bridge. The old man died of liver failure when Yamai was in junior high school. Yamai said it served him right. The time he killed the dog was right after that.

“Hikaru, how old were you the first time it happened?”

“My last year of kindergarten. There was a lot of blood, and mama slapped me for getting the couch dirty. That’s why I hate mama and I like papa.”

“That’s enough. Hikaru, it’s ok.”

“It’s not ok!” Hikaru screamed. She switched back to the strong actress voice. She wasn’t biting her nails. A blaze in her fiery seductive eyes.

“It’s not ok! Because I told Yamai to kill Rika. Somehow he instinctively knew about me and he fell in love. He said he’d do anything for me. He said he’d do things for me that other people wouldn’t do. That’s why I asked him to do it. To kill Rika.”

“For money?”

“He said he didn’t want money.”

“Hikaru, did you make some kind of promise with him?”

“That’s right, I told him I’d give him my body. Sex, three times. But no kissing. I only kiss people I really like.”

“When you told him that, what did his face look like?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never looked very closely at his face. Maybe a little sad?”

I was quiet. No words would come to me. It was Saturday afternoon and the Boys & Girls were starting to gather at West Gate Park. The blending of guitar and the bubbling of the fountain. In the vast sky, thin autumn clouds.

“Hey, Mako, let’s forget about this whole conversation. As long as you don’t say anything, no one will know. Let’s get away from this dump of a town together. I’ll work a lot, and you’ll always get to wear cool suits and I’ll let you ride in a Porsche. For you I’d be willing to sell myself. Let’s live together and have fun. You can do whatever you want with my body. You want me, don’t you? All you have to do is say ‘yeah’ for me.”

“And then...?”

“And then we’ll live happily ever after someplace where no one can reach us.”

“Do you really believe that? Do you really think you can keep lying to people all your life?”

“I do. Because I’ve done it so far. And I have no choice but to keep doing it.”

Hikaru stood up and started walking unsteadily away. Walking like a puppet after hearing some Tchaikovsky concert. She walked on like that, cutting across in front of the Art Space. I watched her back the whole way. At Theater Street she stopped a taxi and got in. I didn’t follow her. The taxi disappeared into the flow of traffic. That was the last time I saw Hikaru.

* * *

After that, I sat on the bench until it got dark. I didn't do anything. Two hours passed and I got out my PHS and pressed the numbers for Yoshioka's cell.

"Hello."

"Ah, Makoto. You certainly did a job on this one. I hear his nose is never gonna be the same. You wrecked a perfectly handsome face."

There was some quiet laughter.

"Oh. I don't care about that guy. More importantly..."

"More importantly, what? Is this about Rika?"

"Yeah, how did you know? I have to tell you about Rika and Yamai."

"Hey, don't doubt the police. The scene of the first two incidents and that of Rika's murder looked completely different. I didn't tell you that though. They were about as different as a bacteria-free lab and a dumpster. We're doing a logical investigation here. How did you find out about Yamai?"

"I thought it through, about a million times."

"Stay away from him. Since it's going to be in the papers I guess it's okay, but right now he's here on charges of assault in a different case. The same afternoon of the day Rika was killed, an eye witness came to testify against him, so that puts an end to the case."

"So that's what happened. Then I guess I'll just leave it at that."

"You don't have anything else you want to tell me?"

"No, that's it."

“Alright. By the way, Makoto, if you’re just going to waste away your days hanging around, you ever thought about becoming a cop? I think you’re fit for the job. If you’re up for it, I’ll talk to the police academy for you. How about it?”

“Thanks, but it looks like I’m not cut out for it. If this kind of thing happened every day, I think I’d go insane. Later.”

I hung up the phone. I went home. That night when Masa called me up to go hang out I told him I wasn’t feeling well. I crawled under my blankets and thought.

This time about what I could do for Hikaru.

* * *

The following Monday evening I threw my bag over my shoulder and headed out of the house. From Ikebukuro, twenty minutes on the Marunouchi Line. I had checked a map, so I figured out the place right away. Kasumi-ga-seki 3-1-1. A gorgeous gray brick building. Ten guards in front of three white arches side-by-side. The people who entered had to show a pass. I sat on a guardrail about a hundred meters from the gate and waited.

My first manhunt. I did nothing but continue waiting there. Five hours later, around ten at night, a tall man I had seen before had a few words with a guard and then exited through the gate. I followed him. There was hardly a figure in sight in Kasumi-ga-seki at night. As if taking a shortcut to the subway station, the man went into a small park. I dashed up to him and, circling around, spoke straight to his face.

“You’re Mr. Shibuzawa, right?”

“Who the hell are you?”

Silver hair in a huge wave. Frameless glasses. Eyes like Hikaru. The man was calm and collected.

“I’m a friend of Hikaru’s. I’ve got something to return to you.”

The man knit his brows, perplexed. This guy was like an actor, too.

I took a step forward and pulled back my right hand in a fist. Feint. I punched Hikaru’s dad in the stomach with a short left hook. When he doubled over, I clasped my hands together and slammed them between his shoulders. He crumpled to the ground. I kicked him over and over in the shoulders and thigh, slow enough to count each kick. Seven, eight, nine, ten. I faced the man who was on the ground, covering his head.

“I know what you did to Hikaru while listening to Tchaikovsky. If you want to know why this had to happen to you, ask Hikaru. Ask her to tell you everything. After that, if you want to go to the police, be my guest. That’s up to the two of you.”

I took off the man’s shiny black leather shoes and threw them in the bushes. In their place, I slipped the pair of Nike Air Jordan’s I took from my bag onto his feet. The first and last present I got from Hikaru. The yellow ’95 model.

“If you show her these, she’ll understand. Tell Hikaru to finish this herself.”

Without even waiting for the guy to get up, I quickly made my way toward Kasumi-ga-seki Station. Well, I knew that Hikaru’s father wouldn’t call the cops. It was probably just that I hated breathing the same air as him.

* * *

A few days later there was a small article in the newspaper. “Deputy Director-General of Financial Bureau, Ministry of Finance, Stabbed!” It said he was stabbed by

his daughter, Miss A, whose mental state was constantly unstable. Luckily, the wound was shallow and it appeared as if it posed no threat to his life.

* * *

Hikaru settled things in her own way. I don't know whether it was good or not. But that's the end of my part of the story. So the rest is just news about what happened to everybody.

Hikaru is now in long-term hospitalization in an institution in Nagano or somewhere. I got a postcard once.

Hikaru's dad resigned from the Ministry of Finance, and became re-employed by some leasing company.

Masa recently joined a club at school. Surfing in the summer, snowboarding in the winter, the kind of club you join to get girls. Perfect for him. He rarely shows his face around West Gate Park, but he's still a good friend.

Shun is working part-time at a computer game company. Since work drawing characters is more interesting than vocational school, he's been talking about maybe quitting school and working full time in the near future.

In the end, Yamai went to the pen without saying a word about Hikaru. She persuaded him by saying she would marry him or whatever when he got out. How Hikaru plans on running from him in a few years might be a sight worth seeing, but I'll bet that, of anyone, Hikaru can ward him off successfully. Because, after all, Hikaru's acting is a cut above Yamai's. Although he might actually understand Hikaru's intentions and forgives her, and is pretending to be tricked. That I don't know.

Takashi is still head of the G-boys. He had a little trouble and I helped him out as thanks for this time, but since that's another long story, I'll tell you next time.

So, about me. I started seriously helping out with the shop. Waking up early to go to the market sucks. As for changes, recently I've become friends with the salesman in the classical music section. For some reason it seems he thinks I like Russian music and he keeps recommending things. Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich. So now our fruit shop alternates between playing "The Rite of Spring" and Bob Marley. I like Stravinsky more than Tchaikovsky.

If you come to Ikebukuro and find a fruit shop playing strange music, stop in and say hi. If I'm around I'll give you twenty percent off a five-thousand-yen melon.

Although, even so, we'd still be ripping you off.

CHAPTER 3

ASPECTS OF MAINSTREAM JAPANESE SOCIETY AND MARGINAL

YOUTH IN AGING JAPAN

Before delving further into Ishida's Ikebukuro West Gate Park series and the way that marginal youth are portrayed within it, it is necessary to provide an overview of the social systems in Japan that define the normal in contemporary society, followed by an examination of specific marginal groups existing in Japan, which I believe to be mirrored in the fictional world of Ikebukuro West Gate Park. I will also explore common views held toward youth in Japan in general, which may shed light onto the motivations behind the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series. This short background will enable me to adequately present my argument in the ensuing chapters.

The Japanese Social System: Education and Employment

Education and employment in Japan can be seen as a kind of “escalator system;” a child goes through various levels of education and, based on the ranking of that education, can enter into the job market at varying levels. As the scholar Kenneth Henshall says, “[a]s far as the family is concerned, life tends to become dominated by the need for children to succeed – success being determined primarily by progress through the chain.”² However, as evaluation based solely on academic performance puts a greater amount of stress on children, the numbers who cannot keep up with the system continue to grow, and those who fall off of the “escalator” (at any point) become

² Kenneth G. Henshall, *Dimensions of Japanese Society: Gender, Margins and Mainstream* (New York: St. Martins Press, Inc., 1999), 111.

marginalized in society. In addition, recent failures of the traditional employment system have also put into question the system as a whole, and raise issues about how it can adapt in the future. In this section I will describe the education system in Japan and ways in which it affects society. I will then discuss what has been called the “escalator system,”³ and the link between school and work. This will be closely followed by a discussion on employment in Japan, ways it has changed over the past two decades, and new variants on the system. This overview of mainstream Japanese society will help to put in relief the marginal in Japan, which will be the topic for the second half of this chapter.

The School System

School is one of the most important institutions in Japanese society. Roughly 97.6 percent of all children go on to high school after finishing their mandatory education (through the third year of junior high school)⁴, and 76.2 percent go on to higher education after graduating secondary school, some of the highest numbers in the world.⁵ Although the percentage of men and women advancing to higher education is almost identical, it must be noted that the percentage of men going on to regular four-year universities far outweighs that of women, many of whom go on to two-year junior

³ This term has been used in many different ways by both Japanese and non-Japanese academics, from the broadest sense of the smooth and constant progression through any institutional system to the more limited meaning of linked schools that do not require rigorous testing to advance from mandatory to secondary education, or from the secondary to the university level. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term in a broad sense, meaning the traditional progression through the various levels of education and into employment.

⁴ Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology, “Enrollment and Advancement Rate, 1948-2005,” *School Education (Summary Tables)*, <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/statist/index01.htm> (accessed April 7, 2008).

⁵ Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology, “Enrollment and Advancement Rate, 1948-2005 (Continued),” *School Education (Summary Tables)*, <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/statist/index01.htm> (accessed April 7, 2008).

colleges.⁶ The need for higher education in order to obtain competitive jobs is similar to trends throughout other parts of the world, including the United States, but the degree to which this is so is one marked aspect of contemporary Japanese society. Most large companies recruit new workers directly from private colleges and public universities.⁷ In fact, the main flow of new workers occurs once a year: April, soon after graduation for institutions of higher education.⁸ Naturally, the best employers seek students from the best schools, although the prestige of the school is often more important than the actual ability or performance of the individual.⁹ It becomes then increasingly important for a student to progress through the highest levels of the academic chain from elementary school in order to attend one of these top institutions. Added to the fact that the status of the family can also be affected by the educational achievements of its children, the amount of pressure put on students to perform well in school is tremendous.

In order to test this performance, a rigorous standardized testing system was developed. Strict testing allows for only the best students to move from high-level school to high-level school. For example, tests to enter a high-level academic high school may be very difficult, practically impossible, for a student who did not attend a high-level junior high school, which again would be difficult to enter for a student who did not go to an appropriate elementary school. The competition for entrance into these schools is intense. Since progression through the chain is so arduous, a good deal of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Akio Inui, "Restructuring Youth: Recent Problems of Japanese Youth and its Contextual Origin," *Journal of Youth Studies* 6 (2): 222 (2003).

⁸ Masakazu Yano, "Higher Education and Employment," *Higher Education* 34 (2): 202 (1997).

⁹ Ibid., 210.

money and extra study are necessary to fully succeed in this system. The need for extra study created a wealth of *juku*, or cram schools, where students go to study after regular school hours, often late into the night. As entrance into good schools at all levels of the academic chain becomes more competitive, the age at which kids in Japan start attending these extra lessons continues to drop, arguably one cause of social problems due to the pressure exerted on these children and the time taken away from them for study.¹⁰ Of course, these cram schools cost a good deal of money, as do higher-level public and private schools, which creates a serious disadvantage within this system for underprivileged children. Therefore, class politics also play a strong part in education. This often proves a vicious cycle for lower-class families: the only way to be employed in a successful job and raise the family to a higher social status is essentially blocked due to the fact that lower-class kids have a tendency to be placed in lower-level schools, making it nearly impossible for them to excel to the extent of upper- to middle-class children their own age.¹¹

Gakkōka

In Japanese society, the progression from school to employment has become an all-encompassing tool for the evaluation of youth by adults. Since education is a major factor in this process, in fact, forming the base of the whole system, academic ranking has come to overshadow most other forms of evaluation of children, even outside the school setting. As Miyadai Shinji, a well-known social critic, describes it: “In the past,

¹⁰ Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, 2002. “Japanese Schoolchildren ‘Cram’ to Boost Achievement,” *Education Week* 21 (43): 8 (2002).

¹¹ Robert Stuart Yoder, *Youth Deviance in Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 46-57.

the home, the school, and the community had their own different means of evaluation...[now], students who do well or poorly at school are viewed by the home and by the community as nothing but good or bad students.”¹² This process of evaluation based on academic standing has become known as *gakkōka* (literally, “academification”).

Gakkōka has rather far-reaching effects on contemporary Japanese society. As Miyadai points out, in the past there were many ways that a child was evaluated within his or her daily environment; the school had its own evaluation based on academic excellence, the community had its own way of determining good or bad citizenship, and within the home, yet another process was likely used. However, through the growing pressures placed on the children and their families to succeed in an increasingly competitive academic world, evaluation based on education became the most prominent form for all areas of a child’s life. This means that a child’s academic excellence and academic-ranking (based on the level of the schools the child progressed through) determine his or her worth and commendableness in the local community and the home. Simply put, a good student is a good person, a bad student is a bad person; furthermore, a student from a good school is a good person, a student from a bad school is a bad person.

The effects of *gakkōka* can be viewed in relation to other issues as well. In present-day Japan, high schools are divided broadly into two separate categories: high-ranking schools (almost exclusively academic schools, attended by upper and wealthy middle-class students) and low-ranking schools (usually technical or agrarian schools,

¹² Miyadai Shinji 宮台真司, *Maboroshi no kōgai: seijuku shakai wo ikiru wakamonotachi no yukue* まぼろしの郊外：成熟社会を生きる若者たちの行方 (Tōkyō 東京: Asahi shinbunsha 朝日新聞社, 2000), 117-118.

occasionally a low-ranking academic school, attended by students from lower-middle or working-class families)¹³. In Robert Stuart Yoder's book, *Youth Deviance in Japan*, he discusses the relationship between class and academics, and the stigmatism associated with low-ranking schools.¹⁴ Applying the idea of *gakkōka*, simply attending or graduating from a technical or agrarian high school in Japan will result in a negative evaluation from the home and community due to its status as low-ranking. On the contrary, aside from extreme cases, children attending or graduating high-ranking schools are seen in a positive light in the home and community based solely on their academic background. As is clear here, once more class becomes an issue intermixed with the affects of education and academic evaluation.

Since academics and the employment system have such a strong relationship in Japan, it is only natural for the effects of *gakkōka* to extend to the area of employment as well. In a way, it is merely an extension of the evaluation by the community. Businesses and corporations appraise young adults by the same means as everyone else within the greater community of Japan: based on their academic background. This only fuels the escalator-like progression through school and work. Pressure is exerted on children to do well in school because good companies only want those who make it to the top of the escalator; meanwhile, the companies themselves, much like the community and the home, have slowly fallen into the trap of having only academics with which to evaluate their new potential employees. The cycle here between academics and employment then fuels itself. To the extent that the evaluation of youths

¹³ Yoder, 46-57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-57.

in Japan based entirely on academics is considered normal, the phenomenon of *gakkōka* has penetrated into all aspects of society, whether school, family, or the working world.

Employment

The average employment rate in Japan as of 2003 was 68.4 percent, consisting of 79.8 percent of males and 56.8 percent of females. Only 14.7 percent of that is part-time employment for men, and 42.2 percent is part-time employment for women. Japan has one of the highest, if not the highest, percentage of part-time employment for both men and women.¹⁵ The unemployment rate in 2003 was 3.9 percent.¹⁶ According to The World Factbook, unemployment in Japan by 2007 had risen to an estimated 4.0 percent.¹⁷ Compared with other major economic powers, the employment rate for women is still quite low, but that of men is one of the highest in the world.¹⁸

As was mentioned in the previous section, the “escalator system” of education and employment is still very much the norm in Japan, where employers simply take college graduates from schools based on the academic progression fulfilled to reach that point. Some elite positions, such as employment in the government, require graduation from a select number of prestigious schools.¹⁹ This focus on educational background rules the process of employee selection. Many young adults who are lucky enough to have survived the rigorous ordeal of entering and graduating from a high-level

¹⁵ Franz Waldenberger, “The Evolution of the Japanese Employment System in Comparative Perspective,” in *Perspectives on Work, Employment, and Society in Japan*, ed. Peter Matanle and Wim Lunsing (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, “Japan,” *The World Factbook*, 2008 ed., www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ja.html (accessed April 7, 2008).

¹⁸ Waldenberger, 16.

¹⁹ Marcus Rebick, *The Japanese Employment System: Adapting to a New Economic Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145.

university are greeted with the promise of lifetime employment, "...the system to which the secondary and higher education systems are geared and towards which Japan's most academically successful students are steered."²⁰ Lifetime employment became a common element of Japanese companies in the inter-war period, and for the most part still continues to this day, although constantly changing in structure.²¹ Some ways in which lifetime employment has and is changing in comparison to what it once was will be discussed in the next section, along with other recent trends in employment in Japan.

Recent Trends in the Employment System

Until the beginning of the 1990s, Japan was not only one of the top economic powers in the world, but represented the ideal employment system, capable of producing "economic miracles." However, problems in the economy since the early nineties have severely altered the way Japan, and the world, views this system. The word "employment" in Japan, even in recent years, conjures up the image of a male-dominated system of lifetime work for a single large company. While this may not in fact be far from the truth, especially over the last two decades the employment system has undergone (and is undergoing) vast changes. Some recent trends in employment in Japan include changes in the meaning and role of lifetime employment, changes in compensation practices, changes in work and society due to globalization, and changes in the relationships between regular, non-regular, and "special" labor markets.

²⁰ Peter Matanle, "Beyond Lifetime Employment? Re-fabricating Japan's Employment Culture," in *Perspectives on Work, Employment, and Society in Japan*, ed. Peter Matanle and Wim Luning (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 58.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58-61.

In addition, Japan's aging society has played a large part in affecting employment and labor markets, as Franz Waldenberger explains:

Only in the 1990s did the Japanese economy experience a strong increase in unemployment. The unemployment rate rose from 2.1 per cent in 1990 to 5.4 per cent in 2002. Affected by an adverse economic environment, employment growth slowed down considerably and could not keep pace with an increase of the labour force. The labour force is determined by the size of the working age population and the participation rate, which expresses the willingness to work. The growth of the labour market was driven by the growth of the working age population, which, officially, includes all persons of age 15 and older. The fact that the working population grew faster than the total population reflects the ageing of the Japanese population.²²

As Helen Macnaughtan points out, this means a harsh socioeconomic problem in Japan's near future – one that is already helping to shape the new trends in employment:

The working population is already diminishing in both real and proportional terms, and this trend is expected to continue, leading to an over-all shrinkage in the proportion of the population that is of working or productive age. Therefore, the burden of supporting both younger and older groups in society, which predominantly falls on the working-age population, will increase and become a serious socioeconomic problem.²³

In response to this situation, a deeper concern accompanies the critique of Japan's current system of employment and other trends in work, including those of part-time and non-traditional employment.

Lifetime employment, while originally “to satisfy earlier generations’ desires for security of employment and income stability,” now is a complex system of career development with increasing responsibility and personal opportunity.²⁴ While still consisting of employment with one company for most of a worker's life, it satisfies the

²² Waldenberger, 13.

²³ Helen Macnaughtan, “From ‘Post-war’ to ‘Post-Bubble’: Contemporary Issues for Japanese Working Women,” in *Perspectives on Work, Employment, and Society in Japan*, ed. Peter Matanle and Wim Lunsing (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 49.

²⁴ Matanle, 75.

wants of a new generation of employees, looking not just for financial stability, but personal development as well.²⁵ Changes in compensation practices, most representative being the experimentation with performance-based pay instead of the traditional seniority-based pay, is yet another way that companies are attempting to change or update the older system to meet the needs of employees and to retain competitiveness for the company in the twenty-first century.²⁶ Far from being extinct, lifetime employment remains the norm in the Japanese employment system, albeit undergoing constant and slight change evident especially over the past two decades.²⁷

Globalization has also been a factor in the changing work environment in Japan. Starting in the mid-1980s, developing foreign operations became a common tactic for companies to gain a competitive edge.²⁸ Kevin McCormick, writing about Japanese engineers sent overseas, states, “[t]he expatriate Japanese workers who crossed international borders on short-term assignments (*kaigai-shukkō*) became important agents through whom Japan influenced the world of work. In turn, as repatriates, they have been agents through whom the world influenced work, employment, and society in Japan.”²⁹ Returning from time abroad, these employees bring back with them knowledge and skills gained in an international work setting which can then be applied to the Japanese corporate system. Just as their knowledge of Japanese business practices affects the work style of the foreign branch of the company, so too does the foreign

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

²⁶ Harold Conrad and Viktoria Heindorf, “Recent Changes in Compensation Practices in Large Companies: Wages, Bonuses, and Corporate Pensions,” in *Perspectives on Work, Employment, and Society in Japan*, ed. Peter Matanle and Wim Lunsing (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 79-80.

²⁷ Matanle, 58-64.

²⁸ Kevin McCormick, “Japanese Engineers Abroad: Challenge and Opportunity in Globalization,” in *Perspectives on Work, Employment, and Society in Japan*, ed. Peter Matanle and Wim Lunsing (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 117.

²⁹ Ibid., 117.

experience lend itself to changes in the Japanese model, something which has been noted particularly over the last two decades.³⁰

Possibly the most notable change in the past two decades is in the relationship between the regular (large companies, usually lifetime employment), non-regular (part-time employment), and “special” (jobs with non-traditional methods of entry: musicians, artists, writers, athletes, etc.) labor markets. As world comparisons have shown, Japan has one of the highest rates of part-time employment.³¹ Many factors attribute to this, including the aforementioned growth of the working population beyond the regular labor market demand (mainly due to Japan’s quickly aging population) and changes in opinion about the goals and desires of young people just entering the market. The choice of many youths to go into non-regular employment is due in part to “...the shrinkage of the labour market for regular workers, the expansion of the labour market for irregular workers, and the increase in the attractiveness of the ‘special’ labour market for liberal professions.”³² More jobs and more opportunities in the non-regular market are attractive for young workers who find themselves faced with poor working conditions and poor job content in the regular market, due in large part to the previously mentioned effects of slow economy and an aging society.³³ The same goes for the special labor market as well, jobs where entry and advancement deviate in every respect from regular employment (in particular, little or no emphasis on education and much stress placed upon ability or talent). In fact, the appeal of jobs within the special labor

³⁰ Ibid., 117-141.

³¹ Waldenberger, 16.

³² Yuki Honda, “‘Freeters’: Young Atypical Workers in Japan,” in *Perspectives on Work, Employment, and Society in Japan*, ed. Peter Matanle and Wim Lunsing (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 154.

³³ Ibid., 155.

market, as opposed to irregular or part-time employment, may be the focus on personal ability and skill rather than academic background. Regardless, these two labor markets are growing at the same time that the regular market is waning; however, this is not to say that traditional employment has disappeared. On the contrary, traditional methods of job entry still command the highest percentages. The point in observing these trends is simply in noting the fact that constant change has been taking place within the employment system over the last several years, many of these changes producing a greater variety of opportunity for young workers in a rather severe job market.

Women and Work

Since the war, the numbers of female workers has continued to increase dramatically, as well as the diversity of those workers.³⁴ There has been a “substantial diversification in female employment,” especially into the various areas of non-regular work.³⁵ However, as Macnaughtan points out in her article on working women in Japan, “women have been for the most part excluded from the mainstream Japanese (lifetime) employment system during the time that it has evolved in the post-war decades. Distinctive gendered spheres of employment were set up in Japanese companies as early as the 1960s, providing separate channels of employment for long-term male employees and short-term female employees.”³⁶ Non-regular (particularly part-time) work and work in the “special” labor markets as outlined above are still where most women find opportunity in Japan today, although this may change as “the increased use of women

³⁴ Macnaughtan, 40.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

workers as a permanent and proactive group within the labour market would help alleviate the future labour burden” looming on the horizon of aging Japan.³⁷

Still, regular employment is vastly closed to women workers:

The economic and productive roles of women in Japanese society are still overshadowed by a concern for their reproductive role, particularly in light of Japan’s population trends. Japanese policy makers frequently cite the declining birth rate as the key concern (rather than increased longevity) and are eager to blame women for this demographic trend, rather than concern themselves with making it easier for women to combine career and children.³⁸

Until those in a position to change the sex-based discrimination within the employment system attempt to tackle the problems inherent in it over the last sixty years, it seems that women will still find it difficult to break into regular employment, and the growing numbers of female workers will continue to find opportunities mainly within the non-regular job market.

Views of Youth and Youth Culture

Japan’s aging society is a problem that has received much attention in the media, and this has cast a certain amount of doubt on the future of Japan. In particular it has caused society to focus more on the children, the subject of both its hopes and fears. The “wild” child and the child balking the traditional systems of education and employment are sources of great unrest in contemporary Japan. In this section I will first touch upon the topic of youth and the place they hold in Japan’s aging society. Along with this I will discuss the “wild child,” the youth that embody the fears of society, and how this has affected the ways in which youth are portrayed in the media.

³⁷ Ibid., 49.

³⁸ Ibid., 54.

Finally I will take a close look at marginal youth, including a definition of the term and examples of categories of marginal youth found in contemporary Japan. This whole section on youth will be completed with statistics from the Japanese government about the real situation of juvenile delinquency in Japan.

An Aging Japan

Japan is one of the fastest aging societies in the world, based on the increase in the percentage of the population over 65.³⁹ Problems with this occur because of the dependency ratio (the numbers of people under 15 or over 65 who cannot work and are financially dependent on workers between the ages of 15-65, as compared to the total population), which has been steadily increasing as the population ages and the Japanese birthrate remains low.⁴⁰ The dependency rate in the 1980s was close to 50 percent, but has been rising rapidly, and is estimated to reach almost 70 percent by 2020.⁴¹ In his book on the Japanese employment system and its adaptation in the face of recent economic changes, Marcus Rebick writes, “[t]he ageing society presents a number of challenges to the Japanese, including the management of its pension system and other aspects of intergenerational transfers as well as its economic growth.”⁴² Therefore, there must be some level of concern regarding the youth who will in ten years be bearing the brunt of these challenges. One author writes:

In recent years one could come to the conclusion that the fewer children and youth there are (Japan has one of the lowest birthrates worldwide and is a rapidly aging society), the closer they are under scrutiny in terms of their living conditions and chances for a healthy development, and especially

³⁹ Rebick, 156.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 157.

concerning their moral standards, values and behavior. This is accompanied by a comparatively low tolerance for deviation from the social norm.⁴³

As Japan's birthrate continues to fall and adult society slowly becomes older, children become ever more important. Questions about financial (and in some cases, physical) security continue to rise, about whether there will be enough children to work or enough "good" children to lead the country toward prosperity. Due to these kinds of questions, there has been a split in the way that children are viewed, and especially how they are portrayed by the Japanese mass media. One way is as the hope and future of the nation. The other, however, is as the road to ruin. By placing all these hopes and demands on the young generation, a certain amount of anxiety and fear is being created, which is latched onto by the media. According to Annette Erbe: "In many modern societies the young generation seems to be taken notice of mostly – or even solely – when they misbehave, and the youth appear in public discourse predominantly in connection with violence, crime, and other behaviors that threaten the social order. Of course, while attempts are being made to account for such behavior, these negative stereotypes generally grant a rather hostile outlook on youth."⁴⁴ Japan follows this pattern and the mass media has been key in portraying the negative side of youth and the problems they present. Two large problems that are seen among the youth in Japan today (and largely taken up in discussion by mass media) are the advent of the "wild" child, violent and uncontrollable, and the apparent lack of interest of Japanese youth toward work, evident in the growing numbers of what are known as *freeters* and NEETs. Also often addressed are the rise of *hikikomori*, or children who lock themselves away from the

⁴³ Annette Erbe, "Youth in Crisis: Public Perceptions and Discourse on Deviance and Juvenile Problem Behavior in Japan," in *Juvenile Delinquency in Japan: Reconsidering the "Crisis,"* ed. Gesine Foljanty-Jost (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003), 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

world, schoolgirl prostitution and involvement in various forms of adult entertainment, and other forms of juvenile delinquency, such as bullying, drug use, and gang activity.

The “Wild” Child

In the late nineties, the “wild child” (as these youths have come to be called by scholars of Japan) as represented in mass media brought to the fore the fear and anxiety that Japan’s aging society held in regards to the younger generation. As the birthrate steadily dropped, the child became the center of much attention, and with that attention came the anxiety, the fear that Japanese youth could not live up to what was expected of them. To some, perhaps, the “wild child” and the phenomenon of youth straying from the standard systems of education and employment were seen as proof that this was indeed the case.

The notion of the “wild child” in Japan came to a head in 1997 with the infamous *Shōnen A* case, a gruesome killing which was followed by a rash of violence perpetrated by minors in the following years, starting mainly with bullying but slowly moving toward stabbings or other violent crimes.⁴⁵ As Erbe says, “[u]nder the impression of such a wave of violence and heinous crimes, usually depicted as unforeseeable and without detectable reasons by formerly “normal” youth...the public mood changed from pitying children to being terrified of them.”⁴⁶ Thus the “wild” child was born – Japanese youth as out of control, completely lacking in morals, and unable to function in normal Japanese society. Andrea Arai, in her article “The “Wild Child” of 1990s Japan,” discusses not only the fears associated with youth after the *Shōnen A* incident, but also

⁴⁵ Ibid., 68-69.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 69.

the fear in the limits of modern Japan's methods for raising children, and the limited scope in which society views the outcome of these systems, a lack of "...engagement with the relay that exists between the successful development of the child (the inculcation of a certain body of knowledge, manners, meanings, and a received set of attitudes vis-à-vis these social meanings) and a national subjectivity, as that which underwrites the former."⁴⁷ Therefore adults, not exploring the social and political processes at work on youth that underlay the entire society, simply began to fear the "wild child," an entity that embodies everything that seemingly goes against the standards of contemporary Japanese society. With so much riding on the hopes of the youth population, seen from the point of view of an aging society the outbreak of wild youth could be nothing but a blow to the future of Japan.

Marginal Youth

According to the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, youth refers to "the period between childhood and maturity" or "the early period of existence, growth, or development."⁴⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, I will use this word to include all people within an age range of roughly twelve (pre-teen) to mid- to late twenties. The term "marginal" is broadly defined as: "excluded from or existing outside the mainstream of society, a group, or a school of thought."⁴⁹ A second meaning, also relevant in a sense to the topic at hand is: "close to the lower limit of qualification, acceptability, or

⁴⁷ Andrea G. Arai, "The 'Wild Child' of 1990s Japan," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99 (4): 853 (2001).

⁴⁸ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. "youth."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, s.v. "marginal."

function.”⁵⁰ In Japan, marginal youth fall under these definitions being young people who, on the one hand exist outside of mainstream society, and on the other represent the lowest level of acceptability within that society. In short, marginal youth are those who diverge from “normal” society as it is dictated mainly by the aforementioned standards of education and employment, either of their own will or forcibly through the discrimination of society.

Marginal youth represents the young people who do not live up to the hopes, desires, and expectations of modern society. In the case of Japan, this often means youths who have failed or consciously avoided participation in the standard systems of education and employment as described earlier. An important aspect of many of these groups, which will be important later in examining their fictional depictions, is that there is often a duality in their marginal status; on the one hand many marginal youths are forced from normal society, while on the other, many of them opt to step out of regular society of their own volition. Below I will outline several examples of marginal youth in contemporary Japan, taking care to note what makes each group marginal. There are infinite ways to classify such groups, so I will limit my examples to large categories that have recently become key issues in the media and of academic research. While very different in nature, the following groups all fall under the broad definition of marginal youth which I have chosen to use for this thesis, and shall be important in the following chapters in discussing similar youths as they are written in popular Japanese fiction.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Examples of Marginal Youth

Freeters and NEETs

Aside from the “wild child,” one of the other major issues taken up by the mass media is the growing numbers of *freeters* and NEETs, those who choose not to (or are unable to) enter full-time employment. *Freeters* refer to young school graduates in Japan who partake in non-traditional work, often that which is “not bound up in the long-term contracts and responsibilities that attend standard employment.”⁵¹ NEET refers to a person ““not in education, employment or training” -- a term first used in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s. Japan, which started labeling NEETs [in 2004], uses the term specifically for young people who have given up looking for a job and often get financial support from their generous parents. They are not considered unemployed since they are not actively looking for a job.”⁵² According to Yuki Honda, by 2006 *freeters* made up roughly one out of every nine Japanese people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four.⁵³

Freeters are the people who fell into the widening chasm between [the three main social systems of family, school, and company], losing their former support and facing the uncertainty common to post-industrial societies. At the same time, they are the latent objectors to the mainstream structure of Japanese society. A considerable number of freeters have rejected the life of the ‘company-man’, which has become a negative symbol of mainstream Japanese society. In this sense, freeters can be seen as potential pioneers of the coming society. Their present lives and future prospects, however, tend to be grim with little possibility of achieving either economic or social independence.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Rebeck, 153.

⁵² Ginny Parker Woods, “In Aging Japan, Young Slackers Stir Up Concerns,” *Wall Street Journal – Eastern Edition* 246 (141): A1-A8 (2005).

⁵³ Honda, 167.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

The growing numbers of the older generation are concerned about the financial welfare (and support) of the younger generation; naturally they are concerned about this trend in employment because it often does little to advance the economic independence of the young, or the possibility for the young to take control of the Japanese economy in the future. Of course, there are many factors involved in this trend beyond young graduates seeking freedom from mainstream society. Many attribute it to factors such as the apparent downfall of the lifetime employment system.⁵⁵ Others, as discussed in the previous section on the Japanese employment system, argue that a severe situation in the regular job market (more able workers than positions to fill) plus the attractiveness of some non-regular job opportunities contribute to this trend.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is possible to see a growing number of *freeters* who cannot find regular employment due to the current situation of the Japanese economy and employment system, and who at the same time actively strike out against more traditional modes of employment. While many reasons can be found for the *freeter* phenomenon,⁵⁷ youth and the economic stability of future Japanese are becoming increasingly important concerns for members of Japan's aging society, and when viewed as the breakdown in Japan's workforce, the *freeter* movement is often seen as a legitimate fear by the older generation.

⁵⁵ Gordon Mathews, "Seeking a career, finding a job: how young people enter and resist the Japanese world of work," in *Japan's Changing Generations: Are young people creating a new society?* Ed. Gordon Mathews and Bruce White (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 123.

⁵⁶ Honda, 154-155.

⁵⁷ For comprehensive discussions on the *freeter* trend, see Genda Yūji, *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity: The New Reality Facing Japanese Youth* (2005) and Gordon Mathews, "Seeking a career, finding a job: How young people enter and resist the Japanese world of work" (2004).

Enjokōsai (Schoolgirl Prostitution)

Enjokōsai, or compensated dating, is a paid relationship usually between an older man and a younger girl, often sexual in nature.⁵⁸ According to a study done by the All-Japan PTA Council, by 1995 it was estimated that over 30 percent of girls in their second or third year of junior high school (roughly ages 13-15) had participated in *terekura*, telephone dating services that often lead to illicit relations.⁵⁹ By 1994 the number of high school girls with sexual experience had nearly doubled from what it was less than a decade earlier, and it is thought that the percentage of girls involved in prostitution increased as much as ten times what it was in the eighties.⁶⁰

Yumiko Iida in her article on Japanese identity in the 1990s argues that on the one hand the aggressive nature of the mass media and sex industries is what pushes these girls to enter sex-related jobs, but on the other hand that perhaps these girls are simply taking advantage of the commodification of their own bodies.⁶¹ The social critic Miyadai Shinji agrees that the girls themselves are choosing this path, although for many different reasons that often do not include the need for money.⁶² He also believes that it is the limited means of personal evaluation within Japanese society (due to the *gakkōka* phenomenon) which pushes these girls to strike out against mainstream society, particularly against ideas of traditional employment, relationships, and the body.⁶³ Iida agrees with the relevance of changing views of mainstream society:

⁵⁸ Yumiko Iida, "Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s," *Positions* 8 (2): 431 (2000).

⁵⁹ Miyadai, 114-115.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶¹ Iida, 431.

⁶² Miyadai, 117.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

While the working conditions of women have seen less than satisfactory improvement in Japan in recent decades and, by some indicators, may be said to have been set back by the tightening of the labor market, there have been a number of irreversible changes among the younger generations on the level of consciousness and lifestyle. For one thing, in the 1990s many women simply began to reject marriage and childbearing and no longer considered the role of wife and mother as an attractive option. For another, as sexuality became increasingly commodified, the conventional belief that the family and women's bodies were the last remaining bastions of morality, sacred private realms free from commercialization, underwent a series of substantial changes.⁶⁴

There are currently many quite different approaches in examining *enjokōsai*. Miyadai Shinji argues that the phenomenon of *enjokōsai* is related to the process of *gakkōka* and young Japanese girls' desire to see the world outside their ever-shrinking daily space.⁶⁵ Yumiko Iida discusses commercial signs in an "image-based economy" and "the changing landscape of gender power relations."⁶⁶ In a similar vein, the attractiveness of special labor markets for youth and women in particular, who find it hard to compete in the harsh conditions of regular employment have already been discussed earlier in this chapter; for young women in this situation, resorting to *enjokōsai* may be a means of satisfying many of the apparent shortcomings of the current system of regular employment in Japan. As far as an attempt at overcoming problems for women within the current system, however, *enjokōsai* is only one, very drastic example of a special labor market; although I have included this section due to its high level of attention in the media, many other non-regular markets are often seen as more viable options for circumventing the downfalls of the traditional employment system for women.

⁶⁴ Iida, 431-432.

⁶⁵ Miyadai, 117-118.

⁶⁶ Iida, 434.

Hikikomori

About *hikikomori*, Iida says, “[h]ikikomori, which literally means ‘withdrawal’, generally refers to those who stay at home for a long period without taking part in any social activities, such as attending school, working, or socializing with friends.”⁶⁷ The mass media helped to raise public awareness of the condition and label it a social problem after coverage of several crimes committed by people deemed to be *hikikomori*.⁶⁸ Saitō Tamaki, the psychiatrist who coined the term *hikikomori* and one of the leading critics on the matter, estimates that roughly one percent of the entire Japanese population falls into the category.⁶⁹ Some of the potential reasons for this condition to appear so strongly in contemporary Japan “include issues related to late capitalism, such as educational background society, extended youthhood due to increasing years spent in education, technological advances in relation to individualization, and nuclearization of the Japanese family. They also include what are seen as uniquely Japanese social values, such as the emphasis on dependency/indulgence (*amae*) and collectivism in Japanese social relationships.”⁷⁰ The family, therefore, plays a large role in the condition, both in allowing the pressures of society to so affect their children via aspects such as personal evaluation based on educational background, and in allowing the dependency inherent in the *hikikomori* situation to continue. It is also worth noting here that “young *hikikomori* sufferers tend to be the eldest sons from middle or upper middle class backgrounds whose parents are

⁶⁷ Sachiko Kaneko, “Japan’s ‘Socially Withdrawn Youths’ and Time Constraints in Japanese Society: Management and conceptualization of time in a support group for ‘*hikikomori*,’” *Time & Society* 15 (2/3): 233 (2006).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

both highly educated.”⁷¹ The family situations that many of these youths come from are very conventional, modern families.⁷² It is only after the condition is realized that a stigma is often attached to *hikikomori* and their families, which in turn causes a prolongation of the condition.⁷³

Social pressures and relationships within the family seem to be what causes *hikikomori* to extract themselves from regular society, especially aspects involving high levels of social interaction such as school and work. Although most of the debates revolving around the *hikikomori* trend attempt to address the outside factors in creating the condition, I believe it is also important to note that the separation from social activities is self-invoked; young *hikikomori* willingly separate themselves from mainstream Japanese society. Again there is a dichotomy here between these youths being forced into their situation and choosing the situation over regular social norms.

The Disabled

Disability is one example of marginalization that is forced upon a person by society. As opposed to other groups who choose not to participate in aspects of regular society, Japanese living with disabilities (both physical and mental) often do not have much of a chance to begin with. First of all, there is a social stigma associated with disability. “Their presence, like the diseased, is something society prefers not to think about too much.”⁷⁴ Education, too, is a difficult area for many with disabilities, either due to forced matriculation into schools with no special programs or which are

⁷¹ Yuko Kawanishi, “Japanese Youth: The Other Half of the Crisis?” *Asian Affairs* 35 (1): 30 (2004).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷³ Kaneko, 235.

⁷⁴ Henshall, 99.

unprepared to help the students, or because of the lack of higher-secondary schooling available for many.⁷⁵ Although great strides have been made in education reform for the disabled, “[p]roblems remain...in the post-compulsory area of education, with the flow-on rate of disabled students to senior high school being about 25 per cent below that of non-disabled students.”⁷⁶ As I have already shown, in mainstream Japanese society schooling is very important, to the point where even graduation from high school will no longer be enough to guarantee success; with potentially limited possibilities at the high school level, future opportunities begin to look grim indeed.

Employment, too, is difficult for those with disabilities. First, due to the strong link between education and work, those who do not succeed in the education system will not succeed in employment. Second, there is the matter of accessibility. While Japan is taking tremendous strides in making both public transportation and the general workplace accessible, impotent laws have not helped to hasten the process.⁷⁷ Specifically, many of the laws created to help disabled citizens contain various stipulations (such as accessibility to public facilities or workplace quotas) but no strong penalties for breaking the laws set forth.⁷⁸

Japanese living with disabilities in Japan have to survive a good deal of discrimination and marginalization from mainstream society. This stigmatization and subsequent treatment is similar to the ways in which the diseased and the homeless are treated as well. While all who fall under these categories are likewise marginalized by

⁷⁵ Ibid., 101-102.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 102.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 100-101.

society, regardless of age, there are a percentage of young people represented here that I consider in my definition of marginal youth.

Homosexuals and Transgender Individuals

In Japan, much like other modern countries, including the United States, a specific group of people is often marginalized due to the sexual (or gender) orientation of its members. This is true, too, for the homosexual and transgender (and transsexual) communities in Japan. Media plays a strong role in both the acceptance and marginalization of these groups – acceptance in raising awareness without outright condemnation, and marginalization through a process of overt “othering.”

Blurring of information and reality by mass media affects reception among other groups in Japan. For example, Mark McLelland says, “[some people] in the transgender community consider themselves to be transsexual—that is, to be psychologically male or female but burdened with sexed bodies that are out of sync with their gender identities.”⁷⁹ The Japanese media, however, often fails to recognize such differences in the community; in fact, notions of homosexuality and transgenderism are frequently mixed and combined. According to McLelland, “[t]he idea that same-sex attraction necessarily involves some kind of transgenderism or desire to be like or even become the opposite of one’s biological sex is constantly reinforced by Japanese media which discuss homosexuality and transgenderism in the same context.”⁸⁰ The media conflates ideas of homosexuality and transgenderism, and in the process acts to foreignize them

⁷⁹ Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 194.

⁸⁰ Mark McLelland, “Is There a Japanese ‘Gay Identity’?” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 2 (4): 4 (2000).

by eliminating anything of the normal (such as the very normal daily lives of gay businessmen or the desire of some transsexuals to live a normal life as a member of the opposite sex).⁸¹

Media has brought a certain amount of recognition and acceptance for homosexual and transgender groups, although not always with an accurate reflection or in the best forums:

Japanese media have long provided space for the discussion of a variety of transgender and sexual practices. Yet the place for the enactment of these practices has overwhelmingly been the entertainment world—a situation that has worked against the development of fixed gender and sexual identities. While transgender individuals have certainly been discussed in terms stressing their “otherness,” the kind of moral and social condemnation that at times has violently erupted in English-language media has been largely absent.⁸²

The acceptance of transgenderism and homosexuality by the general populace is informed through the biases of the entertainment industry and mass media, which have the tendency to focus on extreme or unusual aspects of Japan’s gay subculture, emphasizing its foreignness.⁸³ While society has in general become more respectful of transgender individuals due to an influx of media attention, many still take offense at Japanese society’s view of them as having what is termed “gender identity disorder,” since the idea implies that “to fail to conform to stereotypical patterns of male or female identity and behavior is in some sense an illness.”⁸⁴ Like many of the previously mentioned examples of marginal youth, young homosexual and transgender individuals in Japanese society face marginalization due to their nonconformity to mainstream culture and a stigmatization born from this difference. The fact that these youths are

⁸¹ McLelland, “Japanese ‘Gay Identity,’” 5; *Queer Japan*, 194.

⁸² McLelland, *Queer Japan*, 217.

⁸³ McLelland, “Japanese ‘Gay Identity,’” 5.

⁸⁴ McLelland, *Queer Japan*, 194.

marginalized for nonconformity in other areas of society besides education and employment shows the breadth of marginal youth in contemporary Japan.

Juvenile Delinquency

Every year the Cabinet Office, part of the Japanese government, produces the *Seishōnen hakusho*, or “White Papers on Youth,” a collection of statistics and facts about Japanese youth from the previous year, as well as comparisons with statistics from earlier years and commentary. The first part of the book, labeled “Present Conditions of Youth,” is made up of five chapters, one of them being dedicated solely to juvenile delinquency. The emphasis placed on this topic is obviously high, but it is interesting to see how low most of the statistics actually are for criminal activity among the young.

As of October 1, 2006, young people (aged 0-29) made up 30.7 percent of the total population of Japan.⁸⁵ While the mass media has often depicted youth as violent and uncontrollable, it is worth noting that young people guilty of criminal activity accounted for only 0.29 percent⁸⁶ of the total youth population, and the number actually came down by 8.8 percent over the last year.⁸⁷ Of this criminal activity, 55.5 percent involved petty theft, mostly instances of shoplifting or stealing bicycles, and 27.1

⁸⁵ Naikakufu 内閣府, comp., *Heisei 19 nenban seishōnen hakusho: seishōnen no genjō to shisaku* 平成 19 年版青少年白書 : 青少年の現状と施策 (Tōkyō 東京: Jijigahōsha 時事画報社, 2007), 2.

⁸⁶ This percentage is based on the estimated population of youth aged 0-29 in 2006 (39,185,000) and the number of recorded youths who committed criminal activities in the same year (112,817). If one were to look only at the target age group I have selected for this thesis (roughly ages 12-29), this percentage would be higher due to the low rate of criminal activity among very young adolescents. Statistics from: *Seishōnen hakusho*, 2, 38.

⁸⁷ *Seishōnen hakusho*, 38.

percent embezzlement or fraud.⁸⁸ Only 8.7 percent of criminal activity among people under thirty was attributed to violent acts, broken down further into 1.9 percent for blackmail/extortion, 5.2 percent for causing personal injury, and 1 percent being made up of brutal crimes, such as are often latched onto by mass media.⁸⁹ Out of the 1,427,928 kids under the age of twenty who received warnings from the police in 2006, slightly over fifty percent was due to wandering about late at night, 39 percent was for smoking, slightly over 2 percent was for underage drinking, and 1 percent was due to reckless driving on motorcycles.⁹⁰

Bullying is still a concern among schools and therefore commands a good deal of space in the chapter on juvenile delinquency. The definition of bullying, however, is quite broad, and most cases of reported bullying stop at abusive language.⁹¹ The number of youths joining local gangs appears to be decreasing, and has gone down by at least one percent since 2005.⁹² The numbers for reported usage of stimulants, synthetic drugs (such as ecstasy), marijuana, and abuse of products such as thinner are extremely low and are in all cases either roughly the same as 2005 or drastically reduced.⁹³ It is worth noting, however, that real numbers of drug use are likely much higher, since these statistics only include people who have been found using.

While not comprehensive, these numbers help to shed light on the reality of juvenile delinquency in Japan in relation to the youth population as a whole. In some

⁸⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁹¹ Ibid., 44.

⁹² Ibid., 43.

⁹³ Ibid., 42.

cases media portrayal does not accurately reflect the reality of contemporary Japan, where criminal youth deviance remains relatively low.

CHAPTER 4

YOUTH IN IKEBUKURO WEST GATE PARK

Now that we have taken a close look at the traditional social systems at work in Japan and the place youth (especially marginal youth) hold in Japanese society, this chapter will deal exclusively with marginal youth as found in the fictional world of Ishida Ira's Ikebukuro West Gate Park. The first half of the chapter will be a discussion on the portrayal of youth in the series, composed of examples of character types, including the traits of characters that fall within each group and their actions and views on society. A large portion of this section will be devoted to Makoto, the main character and first person narrator of the series, with an exploration into his evaluation of the good and the bad in society, right and wrong, and his notions of justice. Also included will be discussions on Makoto's relationship to two categories of protagonist, the hard-boiled detective and the antihero. The second half of the chapter will deal with other issues addressed in the series, such as the distinction between normality and marginality, the relationships between youths and adults, and the place of marginal youth, investigating issues of community and identity. Through these sections I intend to give an accurate portrayal of the ways in which youth are written throughout the series. These sketches will become important in the next chapter, where I will use them to delve into Ishida's intentions in writing about marginal youth as he does.

Character Types

Delinquents and Gang Members

The world of Ikebukuro West Gate Park is riddled with juvenile delinquents. From street gangs to violent repeat offenders straight out of juvenile hall, many if not most of the characters that appear in this series, both protagonists and antagonists, would constitute as delinquents – this includes any youth who willingly breaks the law for any reason. These youths can be broken down into several basic types: gang members, illegal workers, truly bad kids, and other minor offenders.

The only other character in the series besides Makoto that makes an appearance in every story is Takashi, the “king” (*kingu*) of the street gangs in Ikebukuro, and with him the multitudinous “Gang Boys” (and Gang Girls, although not as prominent in the stories). Takashi is a smart leader. He brought all the various groups of kids in Ikebukuro together under one banner with his brains alone. Each of these groups under the larger heading of the G-Boys has a say in the direction the G-Boys take as a whole; although Takashi is referred to as the “king,” he is more the head of a democratic organization than a monarch. What makes Takashi so able to act as leader is his ability to truly read people, to understand what they want and need, and to act based on his judgment. He knows better than anyone what is going on in the streets of Ikebukuro – his streets.

Takashi, like the rest of the G-Boys, is not afraid to use violence as a means to accomplish his goals, but at the same time he is viciously protective of his own people – if G-Boys are getting hurt, Takashi is there to back them up. In fact, many of the jobs

that Takashi and the G-Boys take up seem on the one hand to be pure business, but in reality are to come to the aid of other G-Boys. For example, in the story “Eyes in the Water” (*Mizu no naka no me*) Takashi signs the G-Boys up for a job working for local *yakuza* heads to catch a group of delinquents who are hurting their underground businesses. After meeting with the *yakuza*, who offer Takashi a good sum of money, he explains to Makoto that the real reason they are taking action is because the same group of delinquents attacked and injured a group of G-Boys. The reverse is also true – Takashi is eager to help anyone who is trying to help members of the G-Boys, or the citizens of Ikebukuro in general; in the story “Yellow-Green God” (*Kimidori no kamisama*), Takashi mobilizes the G-Boys (and Makoto) to help Okonogi and the valiant mission of his NPO. More than a gang, the G-Boys share a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood. I will discuss this aspect of Ishida’s stories more in the section on community and identity below.

Finally, Takashi and his G-Boys have a certain presence in Ikebukuro. They are loyal to each other and loyal to their town, and they are willing to take any means necessary to protect them. This means that like Makoto (who will be discussed later), they have their own sense of right and wrong, and their own definition of justice, often which does not include obeying the law. In many ways they appear more glorious than the law in these stories – they help the people around them, and they have the ability to spend time and energy where the police cannot, as well as the ability to use methods that the police cannot or will not use. For example, in catching the Strangler the G-Boys spent an entire month watching love hotels, cafes, and other public areas covering the entire town in rotating shifts, twenty-four hours a day. This is the kind of action that the

police cannot take because of the time, effort, and money involved, especially when the few leads they had were not definite. Also, when they finally caught the Strangler, Takashi used physical torture to get a confession. In the end they helped the police to capture a criminal, but the means to that end were only possible through breaking the law. Takashi and the G-Boys follow their own path determined by their own sense of justice.

Youths employed in illegal jobs account for a good portion of the women Makoto meets in the series, as well as a few of the men. As will be discussed further in the section on non-regular employment, there are many young females in Ikebukuro West Gate Park working in the sex trade. As for the men, one of the leading male characters, Saru, works as a member of the Hanezawa Organization, a *yakuza* outfit working in Ikebukuro. His reasons for joining will be discussed later in the sections on antisocial youths and community and identity. Involved in organized crime, his job necessarily consists of illegal activities. Although the character Eddie has a regular part-time job at a hip-hop clothing store, he also deals in drugs, occasionally acting as pusher; in “West Gate Midsummer Rave” (*Nishiguchi middosamā reivu*), Eddie gets involved in the selling of Snakebite, a hard drug that causes a stir among police and the G-Boys alike for its sometimes deadly potency.

Occasionally delinquents break laws and social norms for the mere sake of being bad. Some do it because they see no other choice and some because they have no ability to tell the difference between right and wrong. A few examples include Atsushi and Akira’s gang from “Eyes in the Water,” the boys committing drive-by robberies in “The Silver Cross” (*Ginjūji*), and Sin and Sly in “The Sound of Bones” (*Kotsuon*),

respectively. These youths will be discussed in more detail in the section on “the bad guys” in Ikebukuro West Gate Park.

There are several other characters throughout the series who would be considered delinquents by Japanese authorities, but who do not necessarily fit into any of the above groups. One example is Radio, the radio wave and recording equipment enthusiast who helps Makoto hunt down and record for evidence a *yakuza*-backed drug dealer distributing speed on the streets of Ikebukuro. Some of the techniques he uses, including wire-tapping and creating falsified evidence walk the line of legality. Another character, ZeroOne, works as an information specialist, but that occasionally includes jobs hacking into private servers and selling private information. In both of these cases, as with other youths that fall into the same category, their actions, while performed out of a sense of doing what is right, often brush the boundary between being legal and illegal, and most times it is the sense of doing what they personally believe to be the right thing that allow these youths to justify their actions. Portrayed as the protagonists in the stories, these youths (along with most of the other youths described in this section, including Takashi and the G-Boys, and excluding only the “bad guys,” who will be discussed later, and Eddie) present to the reader a picture of young people pursuing justice and helping others, sometimes breaking the law to do it, but upholding the notion of the good in society. This flip in delinquency and justice will be discussed further in the next chapter, along with reasons for the divergence from reality seen in the physical numbers of delinquents that roam the streets of Ikebukuro in these stories.

Dropouts

Dropouts in Ishida's works refer to a very wide range of individuals, not merely those who left school without completion, but also those who "dropped out" of the escalator system of education and employment – namely, youths who did not continue schooling after junior high or high school. Around Makoto, who only went as far as high school himself, just a few people have gone on to some form of higher education. Masa from the first story, as Makoto points out when he first introduces him, is pretty much Makoto's only friend in college. Madoko from the eighth story "Eyes in the Water" is going to college and working in the sex trade to pay for it. Okonogi, the young head of an NPO that Makoto helps also went to college. The rest of Makoto's friends and acquaintances all stopped short of the national average for matriculation. In particular, one of the main recurring characters, Saru, stopped attending school during his junior high school years due to bullying, and never went on to high school. The educational background of many of the other characters is left unspoken, but it is implied in many instances that none of them went beyond high school. This becomes important when examining the atypical nature of the employment chosen by most of these characters.

Youth Engaged in Non-regular Employment

Nearly all of the youth in Ikebukuro West Gate Park are engaged in non-traditional means of employment, from *freeters* to *yakuza* and from those self-employed to those in the sex trade. This aspect of the characters is also one of the ties that bind them together, much like the previously discussed aspects of delinquency and

education. Makoto falls under this category, although his case will be described later. Takashi and his G-Boys of course count as having non-regular employment, since most of their money comes from gang activities (usually not described in the books, but alluded to through the presence of a constant supply of cash and cars). Most of the G-Boys also have part-time jobs on the side, such as the character Eddie from “West Gate Midsummer Rave,” who had a part-time job in a hip-hop clothing store and occasionally sold drugs. After the events of the first story, Shun quit school to work part-time in an animation studio. Saru is the sole friend of Makoto’s that joined a *yakuza* group. ZeroOne is a hacker, permanent resident of the far-corner table at Denny’s, who employs himself through his knowledge of computers and the internet. Hayato works part-time at a burger joint while he tries to make it big in the music industry. Hasebe is a former biker gang member who opened his own designer jewelry business. Tamotsu and Minoru Ogura, formerly G-Boys and personal bodyguards for Takashi, retire from the gang life to open their own ramen shop in the story “East Gate Ramen Line” (*Higashiguchi rāmen rain*). Okonogi is the founder and head of an NPO working to lift Ikebukuro out of its economic slump. In most of these cases, a non-traditional job is consciously chosen over a more traditional job path, although lack of the higher education necessary to get a “regular” job must be another important factor in determining job choice.

Although the variety of jobs taken by male characters in the series is great, as are those taken by the female characters, most women in the stories are involved somehow in sex-related jobs. The few who do not include Kana, who works as a freelance news reporter, Towako, a model/singer, and Azumi, who works with the Ogura brothers part-

time in their ramen shop. All three of them specifically chose the job they are in because it is what suits them and what they enjoy. All the other main female characters work in the sex trade. Hikaru and Rika from the first story are both upper-class high school girls involved in *enjokōsai*. The character known as “Princess” in the second story, “Excitable Boy” (*Ekisaitaburu bōi*), had worked in soft-core pornography. In “Lover from Oasis” (*Oashisu no koibito*), Chiaki works at a “health club,” selling sex to any customer who picks her picture at the front desk; the job pays extremely well, much more than any regular job she could get. In “Fairy Garden” (*Yōsei no niwa*), Asumi works for a live internet webcam site – while not involving sex or nudity (customers simply watch while she eats or talks, etc.), this job is based solely on voyeurism; Sachi/Shō also works for the same company, scouting girls to set up on the internet. Madoka and Ruka both work at “adult parties,” sexual parties where the girls can choose the men they will sleep with. Madoka is a college student looking for money. Ruka is gorgeous, but deaf; she describes the job as being a way that she can overcome her handicap, work, and enjoy a normal life. Both of them agree that since they get to decline people they don’t like at first glance, they like their job. In many of these cases, though, sexual labor and victimization are linked ideas, and this will be discussed in more detail both in the section on victimization and women in this chapter and in the next chapter, where potential motives for the overabundance of sex work throughout the series will be examined.

In all these cases of non-regular employment, either the characters found themselves unable to find employment in regular sectors due to problems in educational background or personal history, or they chose not to enter regular employment in search

of their dreams or a job that matches them and their lifestyle of choice; as with the situation of many youths in real Japan, there is an almost constant struggle between the two. Many of the characters have nothing more than a junior high or high school education, so the former is often the case in these books, although there are a good number of the latter as well, those who spurn the traditional employment system in search of what they truly want to do.

Youth Beyond Gender

While not as frequent a character type as some of the others, characters beyond traditional boundaries of gender and sexuality do appear in Ishida's stories. The first time this issue was introduced into the series was in the fifth story, "Fairy Garden." One of Makoto's junior high school friends, Sachi, appears before Makoto looking for his help. He doesn't recognize her at first, though, because she looks like a man; in fact, she takes testosterone to make herself that way and goes by the new, traditionally masculine name, Shō. She is the first example in the series of a transgender (or transsexual) character, in this case a man, but born in the body of a woman. Although still physically a woman, she falls in love with one of the other side characters in the story, Asumi. Asumi is the number one girl for the internet webcam site which Shō works for, and in the end, after being saved by her, Asumi falls in love with Shō. This is Asumi's first homosexual experience, and aside from not being heterosexual in nature, is described in the vein of a traditional romance story.

Another example is Atsushi and Akira's band of delinquents from the eighth story, "Eyes in the Water." Atsushi is a very beautiful, homosexual boy who at first

only talks to Makoto about his homosexuality in a roundabout way; he claims to have been raped and used for homosexual acts by a group of violent juvenile delinquents. In fact, however, it turns out that Atsushi was actually the leader of the group, and they performed the acts at his request. In this case, as opposed to the example of Shō and Asumi, homosexuality is portrayed as an act of violence, and since, as will be described later, this group of delinquents was attempting to do everything they could to be bad and break all the rules of society, perhaps they saw sexuality as another place where they could break the borders between what they perceived as right and wrong.

Women as Victims

One trend among stories in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series is to portray many of the women around Makoto as victims. Sometimes it is the result of this victimization that spurs Makoto to act and sometimes victimization is used to explain the actions of women in the stories. First I will explore the latter, then the former, since sometimes Makoto's urge to act is based on a more complex picture.

Victimization of women as explanation happens frequently in the series. In fact, this is one of the main themes in the first story, translated here. Makoto finds out that Hikaru, the female lead in the story, was involved in prostitution and had a hand in the murder of their mutual friend Rika. While not condoning her actions, what makes Makoto act to help her after learning the truth is her background: her father had been sexually abusing her since she was a little girl. In the story, this abuse justifies the wrongs she has committed. Another example of violence explained by victimization is Misako, who the reader finds out in "Waltz for Baby" (*Warutsu fō bebī*) killed a gang

member when he attacked her and her boyfriend. Harumi, witness to the crime, chose not to report her to the police because she, too, had been beaten by the man, and felt that the situation was better off ending this way. In “East Gate Ramen Line,” Azumi’s eating disorder and, indirectly, her homelessness are explained by neglect (*negurekuto*) from her mother and step-father.⁹⁴ Although Kana is one example of a strong female lead, her choice to become a reporter and cover dangerous stories is due to emotional pain from the fact that her body is unable to bear children and her ex-husband and his family shunned her for it.

In many cases, as with Hikaru above, Makoto is moved to action by the victimization of women he sees around him. In the first story, Makoto does what he believes to be right for Hikaru, but before that he uses all his resources to do something for Rika, who was killed earlier in the story. Makino Aki was the girl tortured and raped by Akira and his gang in “Eyes in the Water” before being hit by a car and killed while trying to escape. Researching this incident is the start of Makoto’s eagerness to find the group, and the kidnapping, torture, and rape that they put Madoka (a girl who befriends Makoto during his investigation) through motivates Makoto to catch them. “West Old Shopping District Takeout” (*Nishi ichibangai teikuauto*) sees Makoto trying to help an eleven year old girl who is harassed by *yakuza* because her mother, working in prostitution, will not give in to their demands. Her mother in this story is also constantly beat and threatened by *yakuza*. Occasionally Makoto is brought in by a third party to help a victimized woman. Makoto is asked to find a *yakuza* boss’s missing daughter in “Excitable Boy” and then asked to help in dealing with the kidnapper. In the fifth story,

⁹⁴ Ishida Ira 石田衣良, *Denshi no hoshi: Ikebukuro uesuto gēto pāku IV* 電子の星：池袋ウエストゲートパーク IV (Tōkyō 東京: Bungeishunjū 文芸春秋, 2005), 67.

“Fairy Garden,” Asumi is an internet star being harassed by a stalker and Makoto is enlisted to help.

Although not present in every story in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series, victimized women appear frequently enough (at least one appears as a main or supporting character in over half of the stories) to be considered a major trend in Ishida’s writings. There are a few examples of victimized men, but not to the extent that women are portrayed in this role. Whether used in the stories as an explanation or as motivation, those women who are not as strong as the few who push past all adversity and succeed in Ishida’s world are generally shown as the products of victimization, either by a particular person or by society itself. In the next chapter I will address Ishida’s rampant use of the victimization motif and some possible motives for the strong (and nearly always present) linkage between victims and women in his stories.

The Bad Guys

In these stories there are two types of youth who play the bad guy: those who are innately evil and those who took the wrong path for some reason. More often than not, these reasons are ones likely to be heard about on the news and in social commentary, both in Japan and the United States. Not that this acts as an excuse for these youths – they are still portrayed in the stories as the bad guys, but in a slightly different way than those kids who act out of sheer evil.

The “innately evil” characters, or those who commit serious crimes and hurt others simply for the joy of doing it, are actually few in number in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series. The *sensei* (also known as the Strangler) from the first story is the first

example of this kind of character. He drugged and raped girls for fun, and his rationalization for his actions was a sense of elitism; he was a young doctor at a university hospital, geared for greatness in his profession. Another example of youth who fit this character type is Makino Atsushi, a homosexual boy who, in order to gain favor with a group of miscreants, gives them his own sister to torture and rape. Akira (the leader of the group Atsushi wished to become part of) and his group, who by the time that the story “Eyes in the Water” takes place had already done time in juvenile detention homes and were back causing trouble again, were also missing the ability to think realistically. As Atsushi claims, Akira once said: “Let’s do all the bad things we can. We’ll do drugs, steal, hurt people, and kill men, women, and children. Once we’ve done everything bad, we’ll be famous and cooler than anyone else.”⁹⁵ Makoto and Atsushi discuss how Akira’s way of thinking is like a small child who never grew up. By the end of the story it becomes clear that at some point it was Atsushi who became the leader of the group, replacing Akira. Toshihiro from “Waltz for Baby,” although killed five years before the story begins, plays a large part in the actions of the characters; when he was alive, he had a severe temper and he often took out his anger on anyone near at hand, including women and children. This inclination to beat women and random people is what lead to his death, and to the events covered in the story (as well as the trauma incurred by the characters in the story). Sly, in the story “The Sound of Bones,” breaks the bones of homeless people while they are sleeping in order to record the sound for his personal use in making music. He is completely unfettered by

⁹⁵ Ishida Ira 石田衣良, *Shōnen keisūki: Ikebukuro uesto gēto pāku II* 少年計数機 : 池袋ウエストゲートパーク II (Tōkyō 東京: Bungeishunjū 文芸春秋, 2002), 230.

the fact that people were getting seriously injured in the process. Here, too, the idea that he is better than the people he hurts helps him to justify his actions.

Sometimes, however, the bad guys in the story have a complicated reason for turning bad. In the first story, it becomes clear that Yamai was the one who killed Rika; in fact, Yamai tells Hikaru that he would do anything for her without hesitation. But behind these words is the reason for his ability to so easily hurt people: as a boy he and his mother were frequently beaten by his alcoholic father. In fact, throughout the series abuse occasionally crops up as the trauma that leads people down a path of violence and crime. Another example of how characters can have complicated reasons for doing bad things is the group of kids who attack women from behind on their motorcycles and steal their belongings. While there is no excuse for their actions, behind it all is the fact of their situation: they quit high school and when they tried to find work, there was none for them.⁹⁶ Japanese society was unforgiving to them due to their lack of standard education. In other words, there was no way for them to receive a second chance.

It is worth noting that the role of the bad guy in these stories is only half filled by these two groups of youth; the other half (if not actually occurring more often) is played by adults. For the most part it is the rotten and corrupt aspect of adult society that Makoto and his friends have to deal with, and this will be discussed further in the section on relationships between youths and adults in the series.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 194-195.

Other Marginalized and Stigmatized Groups: The Disabled, the Antisocial, the
Homeless, and Foreigners

Characters with disabilities in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series are few, but their portrayals are all quite different. In “Calculator Boy” (*Shōnen keisūki*), the young boy Hiroki has a learning disability. He spends every day alone in West Gate Park, counting everything around him instead of going to school. Talking with Hiroki, Makoto tells him how when he was in school kids with learning disabilities were simply forgotten about and left behind; now, however, the new system has made it so that these kids are separated from the “normal” ones.⁹⁷ Another character, Ruka, as was mentioned before, is a beautiful young woman who also happens to be deaf. She chooses to work in the sex trade because it is the one place where she can succeed and be herself regardless of her disability. A third, Towako, is one of the few very strong female characters to be presented in these stories. Towako lost her right leg in an accident several years before, but proudly displays her new titanium leg. For her, the accident and the disability that came with it allowed her to become stronger and truly fight for what she wanted in life, which during the events of “West Gate Midsummer Rave” is to be a successful model and singer.⁹⁸ As these characters show, Ishida writes a good portion of the disabled characters in his stories as strong, with a will to overcome their obstacles and find ways of leading the lives they want.

There are a few characters in the series who have purposefully withdrawn themselves from society. The most prominent character of this nature is Kazunori, the sole example in the series of *hikikomori*, who locked himself in his room since high

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁸ Ishida Ira 石田衣良, *Kotsuon: Ikebukuro uesuto gēto pāku III* 骨音 : 池袋ウエストゲートパーク III (Tōkyō 東京: Bungeishunjū 文芸春秋, 2004), 288-289.

school. Similar to Kazunori is Saru, one of the most frequently recurring characters besides Makoto and Takashi. Before joining a *yakuza* group, Saru had first stopped going to junior high school, and then did not even attend high school, mainly due to bullying. In both cases it wasn't until they met someone (in Kazunori's case, Makoto) or a group of people (in Saru's case, the Hanezawa Organization) who accepted them that they were able to rejoin society in some way (although in Saru's case, it was not mainstream society that he rejoined). A slightly different example of withdrawn youth is the hacker ZeroOne, who never appears anywhere outside of Denny's and is only interested in talking with someone if it is about business. This self-imposed exile of sorts is partly reminiscent of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, and partly related to the stereotypical *otaku*, or technology-obsessed social introverts. What makes ZeroOne different from either of these stereotypical groups is the fact that he chooses a public place (a family-oriented restaurant) as his "home." He walks the line between anti-social and sociable.

In two different instances Ishida brings the issue of homelessness into his stories. In the first, "The Sound of Bones," the supporting characters in the story are played by homeless adults, most over the age of forty. The second instance, however, is in the story "East Gate Ramen Line," where the part-time help at the ramen shop, Azumi, turns out to be homeless. She is a complicated character, who ran away from home young, sometimes loses control of herself and gets carried away with her emotions, and who also has an eating disorder. She finds a family of sorts, however, in the members at the ramen shop and she is able to do what she enjoys – cook for people who truly love

to eat the food. In both cases, the homeless people portrayed are good people, and strong in their own right.

Non-Japanese youth sometimes make appearances in Ikebukuro West Gate Park. Often they are in the background, so Makoto merely makes mention of them as he passes by a certain area. For example, in “West Gate Midsummer Rave” Makoto mentions the numbers of foreigners who come to the raves he attends, as well as the large numbers that attend the “guerrilla rave” they hold in West Gate Park. Aside from these passing comments, two foreigners act as side or main characters in these stories. The first is Kashief, the Iranian boyfriend of Chiaki who is working illegally in Japan. He causes problems when he destroys a drug dealer’s bag full of speed, and Makoto is asked to help solve the problem without getting Kashief deported. Kashief’s reason for coming to Japan to work is that no matter how little the companies pay him for work (and no matter how bad the job is), it is still better pay and living conditions than in Iran. He argues that Japan is relatively free from discrimination when compared to the Middle East and anybody is free to make a living the best they can in Japan.⁹⁹ Eddie, the G-Boy who takes a noticeable role in “West Gate Midsummer Rave,” is half-American. His father was in the United States Air Force stationed in Japan and his mother was a Japanese hostess. He never met his father. Born and raised in Japan, Eddie could speak nothing but Japanese and knew nothing about his father or his father’s country; the only things that separated him from others was his English name and the brown color of his skin. Although Eddie had problems getting work, they were not due

⁹⁹ Ishida Ira 石田衣良, *Ikebukuro uesuto gēto pāku* 池袋ウエストゲートパーク (Tōkyō 東京: Bungeishunjū 文芸春秋, 2001), 177-178.

to any foreignness, but rather because his education only went as far as junior high school.

All four groups discussed here, the disabled, the antisocial, the homeless, and foreigners, all have one thing in common: there is a certain level of marginalization and stigmatization that occurs just by being a member of these groups. In his stories, Ishida examines the effect to some extent each time he brings up a new character that falls under one of these categories, and Makoto is often used as the tool to talk about these issues.

Makoto

Over the twenty-eight (and counting) episodes in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series, Ishida Ira has many chances to portray youth (particularly marginal youth) in Japan, and there is no better place to search for this portrayal than through the protagonist, Makoto. Makoto Majima is the main character and first person narrator of the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series. Since the series is told in Makoto's own words and through his perspective, a close examination of Makoto's character will help to reveal much about how Ishida Ira is portraying youth in his stories. Close attention will be paid to Makoto's actions and thoughts on society throughout the series, focusing on his definitions of right and wrong, and what he sees as good on the streets around him. This notion of good becomes complicated, as he struggles with the fact that real life is often made up of gray areas. Also, Makoto shows signs of two fictional, often conflicting, character archetypes, the hardboiled detective and the antihero. Investigation into these two areas should also prove interesting and shed light on the

way Makoto himself is being portrayed in the series. The most complex character, he also acts as a symbol of all the good, all the desires, and all the freedoms that can be found in Ishida's fictional marginal youth.

Street investigator, troubleshooter, fruit-seller, Makoto has many faces on the streets of Ikebukuro. After barely making his way out of a low-level technical high school, Makoto starts the series as a *freeter* of sorts, working part-time at the fruit store his father left behind when he died and spending most of his remaining time getting into trouble. As the series progresses he gets a second part-time job writing columns for a fashion magazine, but still spends the majority of his time as Ikebukuro's #1 troubleshooter. Occasionally he has relationships, but in general he tends to attract men looking to him as a role model instead of women – a fate he often complains is his to bear (unfairly). Makoto feels a strong bond with the constantly busy and ever-changing streets and buildings of Ikebukuro. His friends and those he helps are all people from the streets of Ikebukuro, from his town.

Friends are important to Makoto. He relies heavily on them for a sense of community and for help in his troubleshooting endeavors (especially Takashi and the G-Boys and, to some extent, Saru), but he is also fiercely loyal and true to them, willing to help them in any way he can, even at personal danger and sacrifice. In nearly every story Makoto calls on Takashi for help in some way, be it information, muscle, or to organize operations like the town-wide sweep of Ikebukuro for the Strangler in the first story, or the search and incapacitate mission in "Eyes in the Water." In return, Makoto fights hard to protect his friends and do what he can for them. When Rika is killed, Makoto is compelled to find her killer and bring him to justice; when a rift in the G-

Boys is fueling an imminent civil war on the streets of Ikebukuro, Makoto is there in the middle, trying to stop it from happening. He is willing to fight for peace in his town and for those he cares about, and he finds it impossible to say no when people ask him for help.

Makoto has a deep love for his town and the people in it, regardless of social status or occupation. He is just as willing to help an old friend working in the sex trade as he is a homeless man he just met. In fact, although he often states his disdain for *yakuza* and their rigid organizations moved solely by money, he never once berates Saru for choosing to become one of them. He never looks down on his friends and acquaintances because of their job, social status, or anything else; he respects Shō's decision to change gender because that is how she can be true to herself, and he accepts Hiroko, the mother of an eleven year old daughter, and her desire to engage in the freedom that prostitution brings to her. Part of the reason is that Makoto is just like the people around him; he, too, yearns to be true to himself and to be free. In some cases, what might be generally stigmatized by society Makoto can see in a different light. For example, Makoto never degrades Shin-san and the other homeless people he helps in "The Sound of Bones;" he realizes that when they were younger they were probably much like he is, and their situation could easily happen to him. Makoto believes that no matter who you are or what you do, your life has an effect on others and the world around you.¹⁰⁰

Makoto cares about the people in his town, not the country of Japan or the government.¹⁰¹ He has little love for those that are not average citizens of Ikebukuro,

¹⁰⁰ Ishida, *Ikebukuro IV*, 90.

¹⁰¹ Ishida, *Ikebukuro III*, 137.

such as *yakuza* or the elite. Some members of the police force are his friends, but he only calls on them for favors; he realizes their inadequacies, their limits in time and money, but he also understands how they can help the people he cares about. They, for their part, realize Makoto's genuineness and usually help him in any way they can. This genuineness of Makoto's is evident in another of his trademarks: he never accepts money for helping people. If he is given money to help someone, he uses it to help them directly, such as when Chiaki gives Makoto money to help her boyfriend Kashief. Makoto uses a small part of it to fund Kashief in hiding, and then uses most of the rest to catch Heavy E, the drug dealer who is hunting Kashief. In "East Gate Ramen Line" he receives money as a bribe when he threatens the antagonist with blackmail; he gives the money to his friends for their ramen shop, which was being harassed by the same bad guy. In "Excitable Boy" we see Makoto helping a *yakuza* boss find his missing daughter; here, too, he declines the offer of money. Makoto explains his rationale for not accepting money in two ways. First, he says that by not receiving money he is free to work how he wants to work and there is no pressure to obey the commands of others (strongly displaying his love of freedom). Later in the series he also explains it in simpler terms: he started off by not accepting money and it simply became habit.¹⁰² Genuineness and love for the common man of Ikebukuro are not all that defines Makoto – his ability to discern right from wrong is also one of his main characteristics, along with his penchant for action based on that differentiation.

Makoto's sense of justice is often put to the test in the series. Like Takashi and the G-Boys, Makoto has no problem breaking the law in order to help others. He has his own notions of what is right and wrong, and he acts on them. In the first story, for

¹⁰² Ibid., 265.

example, he finds out that Hikaru's father has been sexually abusing her since she was little, and this is the basis for the wrong direction Hikaru has gone in life. Instead of telling the police the whole story, he tracks down Hikaru's father and beats him up, then when talking to the police about the whole incident with the Strangler, he purposefully leaves out anything about Hikaru's involvement in Rika's murder. Many times, much like when the Strangler is first caught, Makoto and his friends use violent means to stop the bad guys in the story. In "Fairy Garden" Makoto uses blackmail to stop a stalker when it becomes obvious that the situation is not serious enough for the police to become involved (no one is being physically violated and no laws are being broken). When blackmail does not work, he turns to physical violence to teach the stalker a lesson. Similarly, in "Eyes in the Water" Makoto and the G-Boys physically punish the group of kids committing all the crimes before leaving them for the police to find with evidence (Makoto does, however, try to lessen the violence in situations where he knows the police will take over later). Also in the same story, Makoto is attacked by Atsushi, the real leader of the group of bad kids and a truly evil character. When the boy is drowning, Makoto passes up the chance to save him, thinking it the right thing to do for all the people that Atsushi had betrayed, hurt, and killed. In "West Gate Midsummer Rave" Makoto and Takashi watch as the masterminds behind a killer drug let loose on the streets kill themselves by overdosing – again, their deaths were seen as unavoidable punishment for the hurt they caused Ikebukuro and its people. He often talks about how he does not want to see people die on his streets, but he is sometimes willing to accept death as justified. This vigilante sense of justice is one of Makoto's stronger characteristics, and provides for one of the major themes of the Ikebukuro West Gate

Park series: the ability to know the difference between right and wrong and willingness to act on that determination. Of course, sometimes this is not easy, and Makoto occasionally struggles with the gray areas between right and wrong.

For the most part, Makoto has a clear sense of what he sees as right and wrong. As the series progresses, however, he starts to realize that what he perceives as right or just may not be for another. The first time his doubt becomes evident is in the tenth story, “West Old Shopping District Takeout.” In it he helps Hiroko fight off *yakuza* who are pressuring her to quit the prostitution business which she adamantly wishes to continue; the *yakuza*, however, are trying to protect the business interests of nearby establishments made up exclusively of foreign workers, whose economic stability is undermined by Japanese business in the same area. Here Makoto realizes that helping one person may involve injuring another, and neither side in this fight is decidedly right or wrong.¹⁰³ In “Waltz for Baby,” Makoto again faces this question when he finds himself in a situation where, although he was trying to help, no matter what he does he has to hurt someone. Especially at the beginning of the series, Makoto has a firm grasp on what he thinks is right and wrong, and is even willing to go against the law to do what he thinks is right. But as the series progresses, Makoto has more experience with the city around him, and realizes that often things are connected in a way that blurs the divisions between good and bad, right and wrong. Dealing with these gray areas is part of what makes Makoto’s character so profound, and also belies the maturity that is written into his character.

Throughout the series, Makoto (as the first person narrator) gives small asides, letting the reader understand how he sees Ikebukuro and the people in it. Some

¹⁰³ Ibid., 131.

examples have already been raised elsewhere in this chapter, such as his thoughts on kids with disabilities and the school system. Another strong example of these asides comes in a long passage from the seventh story, “The Silver Cross.” Makoto meets the retired-gang-member-turned-fashion-designer, Hasebe Misao, and then turns philosophical, describing how he sees the downfall of traditional Japanese systems around him and the truth about the situation among youth in Ikebukuro:

What I was thinking about was the difference between the new generation of elites, like Hasebe Misao, and the punks walking around the streets, only using their cerebellum to live, like lizards. I also glance over the economics page of the newspaper (it’s a little embarrassing, so let’s keep the secret between us). The unemployment rate for young people is roughly double the average, so statistically that should be about ten percent for Japan in 2000. But as far as I can tell from the kids around me, prospects aren’t so bright. For every one out of three that wants to work there’s no job, and they just keep on doing nothing. And since there’s nothing for them to do, they just sit like that all day long on Sunshine and 60th. I think the unemployment rate is closer to what a leading hitter aims for, thirty percent or more.

Just as [Hasebe] said, in this age educational background and certifications mean squat. Huge banks and car companies shake and look like they’re about to come crashing down. In a world that’s overflowing with things on the surface and materialism looks like it’s about to burst, the sensible elite like Hasebe Misao are climbing up a new ladder and the rest of the multitudes are at the bottom, waiting to fall silently like the sewage.

The ability to succeed freely means the freedom to beat the average person down to the point where they can’t rise anymore. The problem is that nobody wants to hear the story of the person who lost. Not just those who were victims of random purse-snatchers. Every day I can feel the air of Ikebukuro’s streets deep in my skin slowly stagnate and rot. From the dispelled breath of the young lizards stopped by the gas and sewers, in order to wring the telephone charges out of cell phones.

If you think Japan’s streets will be safe forever, you’re sorely mistaken.

Crime, the deterioration of order – both are naturally shooting for the global standard.¹⁰⁴

Makoto’s cynical view here of Ikebukuro is counterbalanced by his frequent expressions of love for the city and the beauty he finds in it. However, what this passage

¹⁰⁴ Ishida, *Ikebukuro II*, 173-174.

shows us is his realization of the problems plaguing not only his city, but all of post-modern Japan: a failing value system based solely on educational background and a weak economy causing vast unemployment, the downfall of companies, as well as shaking the entire system of traditional employment. Makoto's anti-elitism shines through here as well, in his subtle condemnation of those who would crawl on the backs of the average person to succeed themselves and of those who purposefully look away from the problem as it happens. As he says, "nobody wants to hear the story of the person who lost."¹⁰⁵ Makoto, though, is the person willing to listen, and it becomes evident throughout the series that his friends are the same way – the people willing to listen, comment, and act.

As the series progresses the reader often finds Makoto referring to himself as a kind of "street detective," in some cases using the term hardboiled detective (*hādoboirudo tantei*) specifically. Ikebukuro West Gate Park, while not fitting snugly into any one confining genre, displays many of the attributes of a hardboiled mystery series. In his article, "The Simple Art of Murder," Raymond Chandler talks about the hardboiled detective, and what kind of man he must be to work in a world that is steeped more in dark reality than the average detective novel, a world much like Ishida's Ikebukuro:

[D]own these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid...He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be...a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 174.

He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job...He talks as the man of his age talks – that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness.

The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in.¹⁰⁶

Chandler argues that truly good detective fiction must contain hard situations, yet remain detached, and, although the reality is tough, a spirit of redemption must permeate the story.¹⁰⁷

While Ishida's Makoto is not a detective in the literal sense (he is not related to the police or authorities in any way, nor does he earn a living as a troubleshooter), he displays these qualities that Chandler has set forth for the man that must survive within the environs where crime occurs. All of these are traits found in Makoto: a man who can go out among those he needs to deal with because he is one of them – in Makoto's case, a marginal youth on the streets of Ikebukuro; a man who solves problems in his own way – not necessarily the legal way, but the way that he determines to be most just, according to his own sense of right and wrong – a man who knows his job because he has a strong sense of what is good and bad and what must be done; Makoto is a man fit for adventure, equipped with this sense of good and bad and the strength to both fight and persevere in the name of justice; and finally, one of the defining points of Ishida's writing – a man who speaks the language befitting the place, in particular the street jargon of modern-day Tokyo. Perhaps, as Chandler suggests, it is this kind of man that

¹⁰⁶ Chandler, 533.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 532-533.

truly makes a detective story worthwhile, and one possible reason why Ishida chose to give similar character traits to his main protagonist, Makoto.

In the same way that Makoto is portrayed as the hardboiled hero, he is also written as a kind of antihero. For all the friends he has around him, who help him and whom he would willingly help, Makoto is at heart a loner. Although Takashi and the G-Boys would gladly welcome him in, he refuses the offer many times throughout the series to become a G-Boy himself. He often walks the streets of Ikebukuro alone at night, thinking to himself, and when he is stumped in the middle of a “case,” the reader often finds Makoto alone in his room, listening to music and thinking. Also, as Raymond Chandler points out, adventure cannot happen to a man unfit for adventure – Makoto is most definitely fit for adventure, but often downplays that side of himself, refusing to believe that he is good at his role as troubleshooter or that he is prepared to handle the choices that he must make (hence one more reason for the time spent pondering the borders of the “gray areas” in society). Makoto is by no means a pillar of goodness; he has his flaws and his dark side, balanced by his sense of justice and an eagerness to help those around him. For all that, though, he is still portrayed as an average youth in Ikebukuro, one who still gets into the same trouble and has the same disrespect for many of the systems set in place by society as any other somewhat socially marginalized youth. It is this very sense of Makoto as the common man, the underdog, who through his notions of vigilante-style justice works to help the common man (or woman) of Ikebukuro’s streets that casts him both as the hero, and the anti-hero, of the series.

Normality and Marginality in Ikebukuro West Gate Park

Many of the borders between “normal” and marginal society are laid out in the first few pages of *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*. While daytime sees the streets of Ikebukuro controlled by normal society, businessmen going to and from meetings, parents out with their children, kids in school, the night is when Ikebukuro comes alive with the non-traditional elements of the town’s youth. The place that they call home: Ikebukuro West Gate Park. It is important to note here that the streets, the public places, these are the areas with which the marginal in Ishida’s works associate themselves. Makoto describes the park as the place he feels most at home. “Normal” society finds belonging and identity in homes, businesses, and schools. Those who feel a sense of community in the streets tend to be young and not attracted to the traditional systems of Japanese society, as has already been described above. This includes traditional notions of education, employment, and even family.

As for why Ishida chose Ikebukuro as the setting for this tension between normality and marginality, literary critic Ikegami Fuyuki, in his commentary found at the end of Bungeishunjū’s paperback version of *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*, conjectures that it may be the fact that Ikebukuro, though painted darkly, is still in the process of falling; order and traditional social systems are still intact, though breaking down, and this is where the marginal can be shown in stark contrast to the “normal.”

For his setting Ishida chose not Shinjuku, Shibuya, or Roppongi, but Ikebukuro. Most likely there were two reasons. At this point Shinjuku and Shibuya are so well-worn that they have almost no character, and they are too dangerous to let kids run about in. If he was to make a completely new hero and a new novel, not a hardcore hero like the Shinjuku Shark or a dark hero like Ryū Ken’ichi, it was necessary for him to choose a different town. However, in distancing them from the center of the city, there are obstacles in writing “today’s” youth. Perhaps a town in the process of

degenerating, not an extremely corrupt town, is optimal for writing the figures of a youth easily affected by the distortions of society.

In fact, while reading this book, it comes through realistically as a town inhabited by a diverse assortment of young people (streets gangs, school girls, women of the night, machine nuts, etc.). It may be sordid, but Ikebukuro appears to the eyes of the reader as (although it sounds a bit strange) a flexible, youthful town, not as dirty or faded as Shinjuku or Shibuya, but still gently embracing its young people.¹⁰⁸

There is never usage of the word “marginal” in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series to describe the youth that populate Ikebukuro; however, there is a sense that the characters that make an appearance in these stories have strayed from some regular or typical path and are counter to a larger strain of society (one that does not often give those who wander from or are cast away from the grain a backward glance). This is where Makoto and the other main characters of Ikebukuro West Gate Park reside and it is how the boundaries between the normal and the marginal in the series have been covertly defined.

Relationships between Youths and Adults

Taking a prominent role in much of the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series is the relationship between youths and adults. The dichotomy between the two groups usually follows the simple line of youths are good, adults are bad. As we have already seen, some of the youths portrayed in the series can also be very bad. However, the ratio of good to bad among the adults who appear is much smaller than that of the youths. Much of the evil in the series stemming from the adult world is one of the reasons why Makoto and his friends distance themselves from regular society. In this section I will

¹⁰⁸ Ikegami Fuyuki 池上冬樹, “Kaisetsu” 解説, in *Ikebukuro uesuto gēto pāku* 池袋ウエストゲートパーク (Tōkyō 東京: Bungeishunjū 文芸春秋, 2001), 366-367.

first discuss the representation of adults as “the bad” in Ikebukuro West Gate Park. Then I will examine the adults and adult institutions that are portrayed either in a positive or somewhat neutral light throughout the series.

The series starts off very strongly in casting adults as the antagonists. In the first story, two of the main bad guys are the Strangler and Hikaru’s father. Looking solely at age, the Strangler would fall into my category of youth in Ikebukuro (in fact, I discussed him as such earlier). However, what makes the Strangler border the adult world as well is that he is already part of the standard track to successful adult society. His good education and budding profession as a doctor put him on the escalator of “normal” society. This privileged background unfortunately brings with it a sense of elitism, and it is this haughtiness of position that enables him to drug and rape girls and that makes him appear as part of the corrupt adult world. In a similar way, Hikaru’s father is also portrayed as one of the bad guys in the first story. Here, too, is an adult that has reached the pinnacle of the escalator system: a successful Japanese government employee (working in the Ministry of Finance), stemming from a rich, well-educated, upper-class family. Even though he represents the top of adult society, he also represents the absolute dregs, as he sexually abuses his daughter (and has been doing so since she was in kindergarten). It is exactly this kind of behavior that makes regular adult society look so bad in the eyes of youth such as Makoto.

This representation of adults as the evil in society continues throughout the stories, accounting for roughly half of the antagonists in the series. Some other examples include: Caravan, an insurance company employee who starts stalking an online model; Elite, the son of a television personality who kidnaps his little half-

brother to extort money from his *yakuza* step-father in order to pay off enormous personal debts; that same step-father, Tada, head of a *yakuza* organization, who is more concerned with saving face and protecting his image than with his son's well-being. Issei and Hideki, the former being the mastermind behind the distribution of a deadly new drug on the streets and the latter being the designer of the drug, were both very successful before they got into the business of selling drugs – Issei was co-founder of a large organization that produced raves, and Hideki worked for a pharmaceutical company developing new medicines. In “East Gate Ramen Line,” the manager of Noodles (one restaurant in a chain of ramen shops in direct competition with the shop opened by Makoto's friends) did everything in his power to make their business fail because he saw himself as elite and wanted to move himself up from the position of manager to a regular corporate worker. In most of these cases, the adults in question had good, regular jobs, solid educational backgrounds, and many of them were from rich families. Especially since the few adults actually portrayed in a good way in the stories tend not to have such backgrounds of employment, education, and class, it seems as though the notions of “bad” and mainstream adult society correspond highly in this series.

With this very negative portrayal of the adult world, however, are some very strong counter-examples, adults who uphold the same values and sense of right and wrong as Makoto and his friends. The leading example is Makoto's mother. In “West Old Shopping District Takeout” she mobilizes the local ladies to form a picket line near the red light district, not to stop prostitution in their town, but to protect Hiroko, the woman who sees her job as a means of happiness and freedom, from the *yakuza* who

are trying to push her business out. Much like her son, Makoto's mother sees an injustice and attempts to right it through direct action. This sense of justice is not based on the law, but on what she personally believes to be right and wrong in this particular case. Similarly representative of the good in adult society are the old men Kiyoji and Tetsutarō, who ask for Makoto's help in finding the hit-and-run thieves who attacked their friend. When they are finally able to confront the delinquents, they have the ability to see the situation for what it is: a few kids who were never given a second chance, and in regular Japanese society, would never get that chance (because of criminal history and lack of education). They therefore send the boys to work for someone who would understand as well, the former-gang-member-turned-fashion-designer Hasebe Misao, instead of turning them over to the police. Loyalty to one's friends and the courage to act on one's own sense of justice are marked aspects of these "good" adults.

The police, particularly Makoto's "acquaintance," Yoshioka (detective for the juvenile division), and his childhood playmate and older brother figure, Yokoyama Reiichirō (who appears in the fourth story as the new Ikebukuro station chief), have a neutral role in the series. They are portrayed positively in that they truly want to help stop the crime in Ikebukuro, but negatively in that they are often unable to do anything for the people that Makoto helps. For example, they are unable to commit the time and energy to staking out multiple areas in Ikebukuro to find someone, as Makoto and the G-Boys do in the first story as well as "Eyes in the Water." Also, they often cannot do anything until a crime is known to have been committed; in "Excitable Boy" a *yakuza* boss's daughter goes missing, but the police cannot act until they know it was a kidnapping instead of a runaway situation. Similarly, in "The Silver Cross," police

cannot search for the perpetrators of a series of hit-and-run cases until there is strong evidence or a witness. The two officers who know Makoto well do try to help, though, by providing him with information that they have and protecting him when necessary. In this way, the police represent a failure in the power of the system, and at the same time the good that can be found in adult society. This duality ties in with Makoto's realization of the gray areas within his perception of society, and becomes more prominent as he explores other gray areas in his notions of right and wrong and justice in general.

Marginal Youth: Community and Identity

Community and identity seem to be two related issues in Ikebukuro West Gate Park. Often it is a sense of community that serves as the force behind the actions of some characters, foremost being Makoto, as we have already seen, and the goal of others, as was briefly touched upon in previous discussions of the character Saru. The similarity between practically all of the categories of marginal youth presented in the series as outlined above is in that they all share a diversion from regular or traditional society and most find their place in Ikebukuro in the marginal realm of the streets and with other marginal youth. Through their bonds with the street "community," they build their own identities in opposition to that which they separate themselves from, namely "normal" society.

In the first story, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," the basis for a community of marginal youth is given rough edges. Makoto details how West Gate Park, particularly the park at night, serves as the centerpiece of this community, a home of sorts where

youth can gather and which is not controlled by any of the three big establishments that affect the lives of youth in Japan – family, school, and work. Throughout the series, Makoto continually refers to the park as the place where he can go when there is no other place, be it to think or to escape.

The initial description of the park also places it as the home of the G-Boys. The G-Boys act as a small community itself, being a gathering of youth from various backgrounds and with varying interests. While often carrying a negative implication of delinquent behavior, the word gang (represented by the “G” in “G-Boys”), in its most basic form, stands for a group of people (usually young people). Within this gang, each individual member is able to be a part of something bigger. Simultaneously, identifying with a group also works to form the individual’s own identity. This is true too of the G-Boys (and Takashi to some extent). Makoto, while emphasizing that he is not a member of the G-Boys, identifies himself as a member of their community; in fact, after they catch the Strangler, Makoto talks about how going back to the G-Boys’ hangout is like going back to where he belongs. It is this sense of belonging that moves him, and all of the G-Boys, to identify themselves with this community.

Saru is another character who is moved by a sense of belonging, though not to the world of the G-Boys. Saru became afraid to go to school in junior high because of bullying and exclusion from the group at school. Later, when invited into the Hanezawa *yakuza* organization, his sense of self-worth and desire to belong led him to join. Although Saru chose a criminal organization instead of the gathering of youths which make up the G-Boys, his reasons for joining were no different than theirs in that he yearned to be part of a larger community.

In fact, the community of marginal youth in these stories is larger even than the G-Boys or a family of organized crime; as the title of the series “Ikebukuro West Gate Park” shows, the streets (public spaces) become the ultimate gathering place and foundation of community for marginal youth in Ishida’s fictional Ikebukuro. When he is given encouragement by a pair of prostitutes while trying to find the Strangler in the first story, Makoto comments on how a mass movement of youths for a common purpose can work to bring people together who normally would have no connection. Throughout the series, the youth portrayed in these stories share a sense of belonging with the town and camaraderie with each other. Makoto, as the eyes of the reader, relates to us the ways in which the people around him are similar and the links between them (and himself). This aspect cements the idea of community as a central theme of and integral background to the stories.

Since nearly all of the youth involved in the series fall under the marginal categories outlined in the first half of this chapter, it is clear that their sense of community, and through it their sense of identity, hinges on a view of normal society as “the other.” Most of the marginal characters in these stories have, for one reason or another, chosen (or been forced) to separate themselves from regular society, be it through length of education, choice of employment, or other means. In this way their sense of community within the streets of Ikebukuro is reactionary to “normal” society, and most likely the failures they perceive in that society (represented in the series through the roles of more traditional institutions and their representatives – usually adults – as bad, unjust, or corrupt). This concept will become important in the following chapter, where I will analyze the relationship between Ishida Ira’s fictional West Gate

Park, with its community of marginal youth, and reality, especially the current situation of youth in Japan.

CHAPTER 5

MOTIVATION AND MESSAGE

Now that I have painted a rough picture of the current Japanese social system and views on youth in contemporary Japan, as described in chapter three, as well as the ways in which youth and the same system are portrayed in Ishida Ira's fictitious world of Ikebukuro West Gate Park, as laid out in chapter four, in this chapter I will examine the relevance of contemporary Japanese popular fiction in regard to marginal youth and popular opinion in Japan about the apparent failings of its social systems. I will argue that Ishida Ira, like many contemporary authors of popular fiction, uses his works to critique many aspects of society; in particular, the view of traditionally labeled "marginal" youths as undesirable. Ishida presents a new representation of marginal youth, one that plays off set stereotypes and helps to break them down at the same time.

The first part of this chapter will examine in what ways Ishida's Ikebukuro West Gate Park is a representation of reality. Ishida is often praised for "writing 'the now,'" and this is the aspect of his writing that I will start with in my attempt to both bridge the gap between reality and fiction and tease out the author's motivation in writing certain aspects of contemporary society into his stories. Here I will also include a brief examination of sensationalism and how Ishida uses it in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series. Next I will look at stereotypes and how Ishida on the one hand writes from certain stereotypes of marginal youth (and stereotypes of men and women) and on the other tries to destroy those same stereotypes (and why). This will be followed by a discussion of Ishida's choice of popular fiction, and in particular, mystery/detective

fiction, to accomplish the goal of promoting a different perspective. Included in this section will be issues of why people read popular fiction and what impact genre has on the reader. This buildup will lead into the final chapter, where I will argue that Ishida and his contemporaries are creating a new picture of youth in Japan outside the boundaries of the traditional social systems; this youth is not something to be afraid of or despised, but should be embraced for their strengths and their ability to see a way around the failing social structures that many view as imminent (or immanent) in contemporary, postmodern Japan.

Writing ‘The Now’

In 1997, the same year as the infamous *Shōnen A* incident, Ishida Ira published the first story in what would become a very popular mystery/fiction series, Ikebukuro West Gate Park. It was by no means a coincidence that his writing became popular at the same time that the mass media began to focus on the negative aspects of modern Japanese youth. Ishida’s popularity and the relevance his works command in relation to the views of youth culture in contemporary Japanese society are due largely to the fact that he writes what people refer to as “the now.” In an interview aptly entitled “Writing ‘the Now’” (*‘Ima’ wo kaku*), he refers to his Ikebukuro West Gate Park series (and all the works he writes) as “a documentary of the times.”¹⁰⁹ When asked in a separate interview where he gets the inspiration for his stories, Ishida replied: “I’m just like everyone else. I read the paper or watch TV, walk around outside, and take things from

¹⁰⁹ Ishida Ira 石田衣良, “Intabyū Ishida Ira — “ima” o kaku” インタビュー石田衣良— 「いま」を描く, *Shinkan tenbō* 新刊展望 47 (10): 7 (2003).

what I see.”¹¹⁰ The themes and characters that appear in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series are taken directly from current topics. In this way, each new story is a representation of some of the most pressing concerns in Japanese society, firmly grounded in the present.

More than any other feature in Ikebukuro West Gate Park, nothing shows Ishida’s representation of the current social climate as his portrayal of marginal youth. Comparing the character types I have laid out in the previous two chapters, it is possible to see an almost direct overlap between real examples of marginal youth that frequently appear in the Japanese public consciousness and those making an appearance in Ishida’s stories. Many of the characters in Ikebukuro West Gate Park are marginal youths because they have fallen through the cracks or opted out of the system of regular education and employment. Almost all of the characters involved in the stories, including the main protagonist Makoto, have received much lower education than the average Japanese youth, having gone no further than high school (for some characters, junior high school). Most of them also have no permanent, steady jobs; *freeters* abound, as do other types of non-regular employment, notably the choice of sex-related jobs by many of the women in the stories. Those who have chosen a non-traditional lifestyle, such as *hikikomori* or transgender individuals, or those who have been forced into a position of marginality via physical disability, homelessness, or foreignness are all marginal groups who not only grace the pages of Ikebukuro West Gate Park, but also the daily newspapers. Ishida creates characters that are based on the images he sees in the world around him, whether through the mass media or elsewhere.

¹¹⁰ Ishida Ira 石田衣良, “Tōkyō no machi de kurihirogerareru ima o, monogatari ni utsusu” 東京の町で繰り広げられる今を、物語に映す, *Tōkyōjin* 東京人 18 (9): 20 (2003).

The issues raised throughout the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series also represent the current state of Japanese society, albeit in a different way from how these same issues are dealt with in the media. While most mass media tends to separate growing issues of concern in Japan, such as the increasing unemployment rate, the aging population, the trend for young girls to partake in sexual jobs, or the corruption of political figures, Ishida has taken all these things and brought them together to paint the picture of one town where all of these issues are interconnected. Ikebukuro West Gate Park deals directly with many of the same issues that plague contemporary Japan: the downfall of standard employment practices due to an aging population and a troubled economy, punctuated by young people who want to escape the system of evaluation based solely on their education and find said escape in the world of non-regular employment, where they can be evaluated on their strengths and skills; the ongoing discrimination of women in the workplace, also making the proposition of non-regular employment more enticing; the stresses and failures of the education system, evaluating based only on academic merit and rank of school attended, and the problem of leaving those behind who cannot keep up with intense academic goals; the inadequacies of other social institutions, such as the police and government, who appear ineffective, bogged down in their highly bureaucratic (and often elitist) worlds; and the corruption of the adult world (which tends to view the world exclusively in the black and white of academic background and social standing) and the young who rebel against this corruption by creating their own sets of values and norms.

It is important at this time, however, to also mention the sensationalism that can be seen both in the media and in Ishida's fiction. Just as the media tends to portray

marginal youth quite negatively, either as delinquents or unproductive members of society, Ishida also uses sensationalism in his writings. As could be seen in the statistics from the *Seishōnen hakusho* (as discussed in chapter three), the amount of recorded unlawfulness among youth in Japan is drastically lower than either the media or Ishida makes it appear, and has in fact been decreasing.¹¹¹ Likewise, the percentage of young women involved in sex-related employment, although growing, is still less than either the media or the pages of Ikebukuro West Gate Park would have us believe.¹¹² In following the trends of the mass media I believe that Ishida is actually accomplishing two of his goals. The first is to alert the reader to the issues that he is interested in confronting in his writing; if he were to give a simply cursory coverage of youth deviance, it would not make for a convincing topic of debate – in fact, many social critics, such as Miyadai Shinji, use this same technique. The second is to point out the ridiculousness of the media sensationalism by partaking in (and over-exaggerating) it himself. If he creates a city where every young man is in a street gang and every young woman is involved in prostitution, the reader is able to see the disparity between the reality of the Japan they know and the world Ishida has created, and may therefore become more alerted to the possible disparities between the real world and the way it is portrayed by the mass media. This then allows for his goal of breaking down stereotypes (as will be discussed in the next section) to become more plausible, as the reader can accept his alternative portrayal of marginal youth more openly.

¹¹¹ *Seishōnen hakusho*, 38.

¹¹² For a discussion on the growing rates of young girls and participation in sex-related jobs, as well as possible reasons for the trend, see Miyadai Shinji's *Maboroshi no kogai*, esp. pages 101-125.

By writing in “the now,” Ishida firmly grounds his stories in contemporary Japan and creates very believable characters and situations for those characters in which to exist. Where Ishida’s stories really become relevant, however, is in the way in which he portrays these characters beyond the traditional stereotypes of marginal youth, pushing the reader to look at the same current issues that are covered by the mass media in a new, often more positive, way. This is frequently done, as I briefly touched upon and shall discuss in more detail later, by writing about the values and norms of the youths who rebel against the bad that they see in contemporary society. In this way Ishida is able to include social criticism and provide possible answers to problems that plague Japan’s social structures.

Writing and Breaking Stereotypes

Through his technique of writing “the now,” Ishida is able to bring relevance to his stories and a fresh angle to much-debated topics, one that allows the reader to see more of the factors involved in issues of youth than simply the way the mass media portrays them. Ishida’s characters take on the roles of the youth being discussed and in this way he brings the issues to the forefront, contributing in his own way to the ever-present dialog on contemporary youth in Japan. His new representation of marginal youth directly addresses the fears of an aging society which are preyed upon by the media, and in so doing he presents a different picture of the young future of Japan. This picture, however, is still based on prevailing stereotypes in Japan – at the same time that Ishida works to break down stereotypes of marginal youth, by creating characters based on real youth groups as they are portrayed by the mass media he, to some extent, also

retains stereotypical elements in his writing. I believe, though, that overall Ishida is making a conscious attempt to change the often negative portrayal of Japanese youth through his stories.

Since Ishida uses issues which he sees around him to create his stories and characters, it is only natural that the stereotypes he absorbs make their way into his characters. Most of the leading characters in the Ikebukuro West Gate Park world are young males, often on the border of the law. Many aspects associated with male juvenile delinquency in Japan can be seen in them as well, including violence, petty theft (the series even starts off with Makoto and Masa attempting to coerce money from Shun, who has just stolen an art book from the bookstore), dropping out of school (Saru), multiple run-ins with the police (Makoto and the head detective of the Ikebukuro police station's juvenile section know each other very well), et cetera (although, as mentioned before, these aspects often occur with a much higher frequency in these stories than they would in reality). In particular the image of masculinity as closely tied with violence is one stereotype that is strongly resonant in Ikebukuro West Gate Park. In fact, there are practically no examples of male pacifists in the series; most, like Makoto and Takashi, are very willing to use violence when other measures do not seem viable, although it must be stated that some characters, and Makoto in particular, will use other means where possible. In most stories the antagonists are male, and often their reasons for doing bad things are either lacking or due to a very skewed version of reality (much like the *Shonen A* case or recent examples in Japan of adults hurting or killing children – or vice versa – for practically no reason at all). Examples of a skewed reality leading to wrongdoing in the stories include the Strangler and Hikaru's father, both

from the first story, and both of whom sexually abuse young girls (albeit by different means) and use their elite status as part-excuse, part-rationale. Makino Atsushi is an example of someone who does harm to others for practically no reason at all; he hurts, kills, and rapes for no more of a reason than just to “be bad.” These stereotypes, particularly the male tendency toward violence, are relied upon heavily in the creation of the male characters in Ikebukuro West Gate Park.

If masculinity is associated with violence, femininity is associated with victimization and sex. As I discussed in the previous chapter, women as victims is the most common portrayal of Japanese females in Ishida’s stories. This victimization is most likely based on two separate, yet related, ideas: first, the assumption in Japan of women as the “weaker sex;” and second, the very real, continued discrimination of women in the educational system (the rate of women going on to four-year colleges in Japan, while rising, is still vastly below that of men¹¹³) and the workplace. Playing off of these stereotypes are two character types: the “damsel in distress” character, who Makoto helps either directly or indirectly in the stories, and the young women working in non-regular employment (usually the sex trade). Often these two character types mix within the same leading female role. As for the former, these characters are based on the stereotype of women as weak and victimized, needing the help of an outside agent (usually a man) to help them or solve their problems.

Sex-related work among young women has been the cause of much recent media attention in Japan. As touched upon in chapter three, some social critics such as Yumiko Iida relegate the choice to become involved in the sex trade to issues of Japan’s “sign-economy” and female identity, arguing that by replacing the real self with a

¹¹³ MEXT, “Enrollment and Advancement Rate.”

commercially created self and living up to the expectations of adult men as found in the media, young girls in Japan can avoid the threat to their true identities by contemporary society.¹¹⁴ Other critics, like Miyadai Shinji, relate the choice of sexual labor to the desire to escape the demands of regular society, particularly those between education and standard employment. In either case, the image of the sexual worker as a young girl trying to flee from certain pressures perpetuates again the concept of the woman as victim in Japanese society.

Two stereotypes of Japanese (particularly male) adults have also made their way into Ishida's characters: corruption and a lack of caring. Corruption generally shows itself through the mainly male-dominated institutions of government and the working world, two institutions which also have a strong effect on education. Scandals abound within the government, and it is widely considered to be extremely ineffective in making strong decisions to benefit the people of Japan. Even now, as of the writing of this essay in early 2008, newspapers are riddled with articles about the Japanese Diet and the standoff between political factions, no one willing to accept another's idea or propose a better one themselves. The current employment system, as I have shown in chapter three, also has its faults, particularly discriminatory hiring and advancement practices based on educational background and gender. Via this weight placed on education, the adult world can be seen as particularly uncaring, not taking interest so much in individuals as in good resumes, placing importance on numbers and names over personality and skills. Corruption and a lack of care and honest interest in youth are the basis for adult characters in Ikebukuro West Gate Park, and it is often this

¹¹⁴ Iida, 426-434.

negative image of the contemporary adult world which Ishida uses to create the antagonists for his stories.

Given these stereotypes which Ishida borrows from heavily in his work, it is important to see how he then takes and either breaks or bends them so as to give a new portrayal of contemporary Japanese youth. Often this is done by taking characters based on prevailing stereotypes and then adding other facets to their personalities or actions, as is the case with most of the male protagonists in the stories. Another way he accomplishes this is by following the stereotypical model but changing just a single aspect, such as the rationale for fitting into the stereotypical image, as is often the case for the female protagonists or ‘victims.’ The changes Ishida makes here represent a new potential story of youth in Japan and a counterbalance to the dominating, often one-sided portrayals made by the mass media concerning youth and the problems associated with them.

As Alisa Freedman, the only other scholar to date to write about Ishida’s works in English, says, “[j]uxtaposed to prevailing images of the seductively innocent *shōjo* or young girl, whose aberrant behavior is often blamed on consumer culture, the *shōnen* or teenage boy has represented both the potentials and failures of Japanese modernization projects since the Meiji period.”¹¹⁵ Ishida makes a serious attempt at breaking down the negative images associated with young males in Japanese society, downplaying their failures and attempting to provide a broader picture of the positive influence they can have on a society with failures of its own. Freedman also relates the following fact: “Ishida has stated in press interviews that his protagonists provide a counter-image to

¹¹⁵ Alisa Freedman, “Stories of boys and buildings: Ishida Ira’s 4-Teen in 2002 Tokyo,” *Japan Forum* 18 (3): 383 (2006).

the general impression of male teenagers as violent and apathetic.”¹¹⁶ The best example of how Ishida does this in Ikebukuro West Gate Park is, naturally, through the main character, Makoto. Makoto in many ways falls into the stereotype of the marginal teenage boy. He has made his share of trouble and had multiple run-ins with the police; he has stolen; he runs with a dangerous crowd; he did not get educated at a level (college) necessary to truly succeed in society; and he leans toward violence to solve a good deal of the problems he faces. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Makoto also acts as a beacon of hope when examining these youths. He really cares about the people around him – his family, friends, and community; most of the Ikebukuro West Gate Park stories involve him helping those who have nowhere else to turn. Makoto has a strong sense of justice, one that does not necessarily follow with the law, but one that is capable of determining what is good and what is bad in his eyes, and furthermore, he has the ability to act on that determination. In the first story alone it is his ability to discern between right and wrong that guides Makoto through the difficult decisions facing him in dealing with the Strangler, Hikaru, and her father.

Makoto is not the only male character to break the mold of a media-bred stereotype. Takashi and his gang boys, while for all purposes a gang with the usual attributes of violence and law-breaking, also represent the potentials of contemporary Japanese youth: fairness, a new standard of worth, and smoothly operating social structures. Takashi’s G-Boys run like a well-greased democratic system, where everybody has a voice and decisions are made quickly and efficiently, and then carried out in a timely fashion – the ideal of government. This is opposed to the reality of government, where corruption, lack of representation, and most of all inefficiency in

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 386.

dealing with important issues often seem to render it ineffective. The G-Boys are fair in dealing with others, and take this to the next level through a willingness to be severe to those who deserve it; in this way, the sense of justice that moves Makoto can also be seen in Takashi and the G-Boys as well. Lastly, the boys in the streets of Ishida's Ikebukuro have a new set of values when determining worth, in particular a general lack of interest in things such as educational background or employment history, family or social situation. They value honesty, loyalty, ability, effectiveness, and a willingness to help one another. It is the very position of being marginal that allows these boys to form their own set of beliefs away from the stagnant (or deteriorating) social systems already in place, and, as I will argue later, this is what Ishida Ira is drawing on to promote his new view of contemporary Japanese youth.

While the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series is mainly a story of boys, there are several female characters, most of whom, in their own way, also act against the dominant stereotypes that Ishida uses to form them. Ishida's female characters are often associated with victimization, but Ishida tends to twist the victimization theme in that many of his female characters are also quite strong in their own right. The journalist Kana, after being forced out of a marriage and bearing the brunt of a good deal of emotional distress due to her inability to have children, has found her own professional career (one that takes a lot of strength to engage in) and taken control of her life, living it the way she wants. Towako, the model/singer, too, has chosen to put the past behind her and build a new, stronger life because of it. Even Hikaru, whose actions largely stem from being sexually abused by her father, still has the strength to do what she feels

is right in the end, both in relation to telling Makoto the truth about what happened to Rika and in finally confronting her father.

The frequency with which female characters in this series partake in sexual jobs appears at first to be related to both the idea of female discrimination in the workplace and to the issues brought up by the mass media and social critics about women fleeing from certain social pressures. While Ishida certainly uses these ideas in his characterizations (for example Hikaru running from both her father and her life as an upper-class schoolgirl, where she is seen as merely a product of her social situation), he adds a rationale to the choice of sexual labor that is not commonly voiced, creating a different picture of the women partaking in this type of non-regular employment. Certainly there is the idea that discrimination and a kind of victimization by society in general is what drives women to sex-related employment. However, Ishida also employs the ideas I touched upon in chapter three, that non-regular employment (of any kind) can function as a way to break free from the constrictions of personal boundaries while at the same time providing an outlet where a worker can be hired and evaluated based on their own personal skills and abilities, and where individuality lends more to job performance than it would in standard employment. In many ways it is a sense of independence (although necessarily qualified independence – these jobs may have the ability to give women the financial stability that would be hard to find elsewhere, but at a price that many women would not be willing to take; in this sense independence and freedom are not the same thing) that drives many of the female characters in these stories to do sexual work. In Hikaru's case, prostitution is a way for her to be who she wants to be, away from the judgments that come with academics or class. Ruka, a deaf

girl working in prostitution, sees it as a way for her to overcome her handicap while earning money, allowing her to express herself without having her deficiencies affect her negatively. Many other characters (Madoka, Chiaki, even the slightly older Hiroko) claim to engage in sexual work because they enjoy the freedom, the money, the job itself, and the independence.

However, as was noted in the previous section, Ishida is most likely engaging in a bit of sensationalism here. On the one hand, he brings up the topic of sexual jobs so frequently that it becomes impossible to ignore it when reading his stories; this could be in an attempt to draw attention to the problem rather than to glorify it. On the other hand, Ishida could be using the example of illicit jobs to provide commentary on the state of the Japanese working world for women in general. In chapter three I examined the limited options for women in the current system of regular employment as well as some scholars' beliefs that women will have to take a greater share of the burden of regular jobs in the future when reduced numbers of working-age males will be too low to keep the economy running. Through Ishida's portrayal of strong and mostly independent women choosing to partake in sex-related jobs he may be trying to comment on the current lack of opportunity for women in the regular markets and the detriment this causes to society. At the same time he is able to express young people's desire for jobs which focus less on academic background or gender and more on personal ability and performance, which in fact reflects the recent trends of young women (and men) to forgo regular employment for more non-traditional yet ability-driven job markets. In this way, although Ishida does write many of his female characters as the victims, it seems that he is attempting to qualify that stereotype by

creating strong, independent women and by exploring their apparent victimization by going deeper than the simple equation of women as weak and avidly pursuing the social root of the problem.

Ishida Ira uses many of the stereotypes associated with youth to create the basis for his characters, in particular linking violence with masculinity, victimization with femininity, and using standard media images of marginal youth. He then rends those stereotypes by qualifying male violence with a sense of justice, balancing the victimization of women with strong and fiercely independent characters, and adding to general archetypes of marginal youth a rationale and other personal qualities that bring the characters closer to the real situation of human beings than the very one-sided media portrayal allows for. A further stereotypical portrayal of marginal youth is as not being productive members of society. Ishida shatters this image by writing characters who do what they can in their own ways, occasionally skirting the rules of the system, but also avoiding its failures. It is this aspect Ishida is promoting in his production of a new image of marginal youth in contemporary Japan, and which I shall address again in the following chapter.

Popular Fiction and the Effects of Genre

In order to see the extent to which Ishida's new portrayal of marginal youth is viewed and internalized, it is necessary to take a slight digression and examine the roles that popular fiction and genre (in this case particularly mystery/detective fiction) play in expressing and proliferating a certain message. Ishida's penchant for writing 'the now' certainly affects the kind of literature he chooses to write, as well as his interest in style.

Genre affects the way the reader views a particular story, and it determines to some extent the situations plausible within the story.¹¹⁷ In addition, the reader of popular fiction (and hardboiled mystery/detective fiction specifically) both expects and looks for something in the work that is perhaps very particular to that kind of writing.¹¹⁸ This is what I intend to briefly explore here, making clear the processes at work which allow Ishida to express his message clearly to a large number and variety of people.

Popular fiction (*taishūbungaku*) is in essence fiction for the masses, now.¹¹⁹ It is written with the intent to sell, taking into account consumer demands which often include violence, sex, and easily understood language. The aim is not for “high” or “pure” literature (*junbungaku*), but for fiction that can be read by a wide, general readership. So-called “high” literature is often written for a very elite audience, highly educated and well versed in literature, and there is a tendency for it to deal with issues of the human condition (often introspectively).¹²⁰ While this aspect may not be completely absent from popular fiction, the popular leans more toward the importance of story, and any message expressed is usually done through the story and the interactions of the characters. Genre also greatly affects this process and will be discussed in more detail below. Popular fiction is also frequently punctuated by simple (as opposed to difficult or convoluted) language; for example, the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series is written in a style mimicking spoken language like one would hear on the

¹¹⁷ John G. Cawelti, “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature,” in *The Study of Popular Fiction: A Source Book*, ed. Bob Ashley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 92; John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2006), 105.

¹¹⁸ Mullan, 105.

¹¹⁹ For a comprehensive discussion on the origin and definitions of *taishūbungaku* in Japan, see Matthew C. Strecher, “Purely Mass or Massively Pure? The Division between ‘Pure’ and ‘Mass’ Literature,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, 51 (3): 357-374 (1996).

¹²⁰ Strecher, 366-367.

streets of Tokyo today. In this way, popular fiction makes for much lighter reading, an aspect which allows it accessibility to a broader range of readers.

The issue of present-day relevance is also part of popular fiction's appeal. While there are certainly genres of fiction that have little to do story-wise about the present, there are some, like Ikebukuro West Gate Park, which are very grounded in the present and which deal with current issues of importance or concern. Ishida's writing of 'the now' is a perfect example of this. Readers of popular fiction know that they can understand and relate to what they are going to read because of this foundation in the present. Even those examples of popular fiction which do not have a story based in the present I would argue still share common elements, which become clear through an examination of the reasons why people read the stories in the first place. Of course entertainment (and through it to some extent, escape) is one reason why people read popular fiction, and it is this aspect to which authors generally sell. However, there is another reason I believe people read fiction (of any type): they can see in the stories a sort of guide, or set of values, and look to fiction in order to form their own ideas of how to live. It is the thoughts and actions of the characters in the stories that we as readers take note of; we know the characters are not real, yet we can find some aspect of them that we either see in ourselves or wish to see in ourselves.¹²¹ In this way, even stories that do not have a present-day setting can become relevant to the present situation of the reader. This closeness, or immediacy, is what can give popular fiction meaning beyond being solely entertainment.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Kwasniewski, "Thrilling Structures? Science Fiction from the Early 'Amazing' and Detective Fiction," in *The Study of Popular Fiction: A Source Book*, ed. Bob Ashley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 122.

Just as the kind of literature (popular or “high”) can have a bearing on both audience and impact, genre, too, affects the way in which a story is perceived and even by whom it is read. Genre marks in some sense the difficulty of the text, both in writing style and content, and categorization allows for the rough boundaries of content to be pre-determined. In general, if a reader picks up a mystery, he or she knows roughly what to expect; the same applies to fantasy, romance, historical fiction, et cetera. The genre also allows for the setting and character types found in the stories. For example, mystery, and in particular the sub-classification of hardboiled detective fiction, allows for the somewhat dark setting of Ikebukuro West Gate Park, urban streets riddled with violence and social concerns, and for Makoto, the protagonist who displays all the qualities Raymond Chandler sets out for the hardboiled detective (as quoted in the previous chapter). Because it is a hardboiled mystery novel, Ishida Ira is justified, even expected, to create such characters and situations. These are hardly the kind of things one would expect from a romance novel, for example. So genre affects the expectations of the reader, plays to those expectations, and only then, once the reader is made comfortable, can genre be used to promote a new idea.

In the case of Ishida Ira and Ikebukuro West Gate Park, the genre of hardboiled mystery is what allows him to address the popular reader and share his perspective on marginal youth in Japan. While firmly entrenched in the tradition of popular literature, the mystery novel does deal with social concerns. In her book on detective fiction in Japan, Amanda Seaman says, “genre novels provide a ‘controlled space’ that allows for the exploration of alternative perceptions and constructions, a space in which cultural

fears and public concerns can be investigated by a wide readership.”¹²² This, then, gives mysteries a dual role:

first it allows for interpretation in the text of certain issues, and second, it presents those issues to a larger audience, providing a forum to consider possibly alternative viewpoints. This can be seen most distinctly in the way in which detective fiction represents urban life and urban problems, providing a discourse about the city that parallels but exists apart from that generated by academic urban studies.¹²³

It is the “formulaic nature” of the mystery novel, a standard characteristic of the genre, which “makes it such a good vehicle for the expression of cultural complexities in an accessible format.”¹²⁴ Thus the very nature of the genre allows it to be read by a wide audience while retaining some amount of significance regarding issues of contemporary society.

Mysteries have the ability to create discussion on many subjects, including those supposedly inherent only in “high” literature (particularly issues of social relevance and the human condition), though in a more roundabout way – the social relevance found in mystery is more of a by-product of the form, not the purpose of it. This falls perfectly in line with what Ishida Ira says about his own mystery series, *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*. Simply stated, he uses the real world around him to create an interesting story; his stories, far from being didactic, are meant to, if anything, be more of a news bulletin of the times, and much like the near-fictional newspapers of early, pre-modern Japan, are intended to entertain as much as inform.¹²⁵ However, since his stories have characters modeled after marginal youth and their role in contemporary society, the product of his

¹²² Amanda C. Seaman, *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 7.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Ishida, “Kurihirogerareru ima o,” 20.

writings is a new perspective on socially pertinent issues, and the possibility of the creation of a realization among a large group of readers that these issues exist and have some connection to their lives.

In conclusion, the fact that Ikebukuro West Gate Park is able to potentially address and raise awareness of social problems and present a unique representation of marginal youth in Japan, one that might be different from that portrayed by the mass media or academics, is due in large part to the genre of mystery fiction. Mystery as a genre allows works such as Ikebukuro West Gate Park to reach a large audience through marketing strategies for popular fiction, while at the same time express a different perspective regarding current social concerns and issues. While these qualities may be found in “high” literature as well, the innate failing of such an elite classification of literature is that it becomes inaccessible to a wide range of people – the same people who may very well pick up a mystery novel. Both popular and “high” literature can be significant in a social context, but genre is the factor that goes a long way in determining how widespread the significance may become.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Ishida Ira's attempts at destroying certain prevailing, negative stereotypes about Japanese youth and replacing standard representations with more positive portrayals are aimed at the creation of a wider public perspective where new ideas and possibilities can be examined without the interference of current methods of value judgment. In light of a changing society with aging, failing social structures and institutions, Ishida, and I would argue many of his contemporaries, provide the general reading public (via the easily accessible medium of popular fiction) with new representations of contemporary youth, focusing on both the weaknesses inherent, born from the breakdown around them, and the abilities inherent in the young people of contemporary Japan that will allow them to overcome the current problems the country faces. Through a mainly positive representation of marginal youth, Ishida, along with many other writers of contemporary popular Japanese fiction, examines alternative perspectives and possible solutions to social problems, and in doing so also acts to raise awareness and promote discussion among the general public about pertinent social issues. I would like to conclude this thesis by stressing three aspects of popular fiction in relation to how issues of marginal youth are dealt with by contemporary Japanese authors, and specifically Ishida Ira as my example: first, there is a strong focus on raising awareness of social problems in these works – problems in failing social structures, issues of marginality, and representation of youth; second, there is a tendency to try and replace negative media-driven stereotypes of marginal youth with positive portrayals; and third,

these new representations of marginal youth, when viewed with a critical eye, may include alternatives to some of the social problems about which these authors are attempting to raise awareness.

The backdrop for the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series and many similar popular novels is the failing social structures of contemporary Japan, in particular the current systems of education and employment. As I discussed in chapter three, the perpetuation of personal evaluation based solely on academic merit, the tendency for social status to affect level of education (and that level of education to in turn determine personal evaluation), and the connection between education and employment opportunities present several difficult problems for the young people of Japan, in the end severely limiting their ability to succeed in society. The strong ties between academics and the working world, accompanied by the breakdown of the prevailing employment system, in place for nearly the last half century, also present difficulties for the up-and-coming workers of Japan, not to mention a stagnant economy, rampant corruption in both business and government, and the already present discrimination in the working world for certain groups, including most notably women. As far as the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series is concerned, Ishida stresses this background for two reasons: one, to create a version of normality for his marginal characters to differentiate themselves from and exist; and two, to put a certain amount of weight on the negative aspects of current social institutions, which then services as both a critique and a way to possibly initiate further discussion among his readership. Similarly, Ishida's stories consist of almost entirely marginal characters, which allows him to create his own, new, perspective on marginal youth (which I shall explore in more detail later), and which allows him to

critique both society's views of marginality and the value of what society holds as "normal." As Ishida is already working to criticize the failing social systems in contemporary Japan, this critique of "normal" society also must have a quite negative leaning. This is emphasized as well by Ishida's portrayal of adult society as corrupt, further questioning the standards of traditional institutions. Finally, Ishida's use of sensationalism as discussed in chapter five is another way in which he puts pressure on and highlights the faults he sees in contemporary society, mainly through overemphasizing certain stereotypes (such as women as victims) or minor aspects of youth in Japan (including delinquency rates).

Aside from attempting to raise the level of awareness about certain issues in Japan, many authors of contemporary popular fiction focus on presenting modern youth in a more positive fashion than is often awarded them. As I have shown in chapter four, particularly in the section on Makoto, and in my discussion on breaking stereotypes in chapter five, Ishida Ira has actively attempted to represent marginal youth in a positive way, often at odds with common portrayals by the mass media. The main means by which Ishida does this is in writing characters with their own strong sense of values and moral code. This includes, as pointed out earlier, a keen sense of justice, knowing what is right and wrong on a personal level and acting on those beliefs, and an honest, deep caring for family, friends, and community. These values can be seen as a direct response to the corruption and the lack of non-academic influence in the evaluation of youth, brought about by the *gakkōka* phenomenon discussed in detail in chapter three. At a point in time where all modes of evaluation for Japanese youth have converged in one institution, the education system, these marginal youths can be seen as attempting

to create an alternate system of values counter to the mainstream, monopolized system. The point is further promoted by Ishida's criticism of the system already in place, helping the good values apparent in his portrayal of marginal youth to appear even better, necessary, and desired. Media tends to portray Japanese youth as uncontrollable and lacking in moral fiber, hence the fear generated by the notion of the "wild child," but Ishida presents a picture of Japanese marginal youth as holding their own strict values and truly realizing the difference between right and wrong. Again, as opposed to many of the social institutions in Japan which have received criticism for ineffectiveness and elitism, Ishida writes marginal youth as caring, able, and in a position to work around failures in the current systems of education, employment, and personal evaluation.

This brings me to my last point: that through these positive depictions of marginal youth contemporary fiction authors may be attempting to show us a glimpse of alternatives to current problem areas within Japanese society. As discussed in chapter three, marginal youth are those who have either been pushed aside by the social systems or choose of their own will to separate themselves from regular society; marginal youth are at once emerging from traditional social structures and located outside of them. Therefore, their marginality is directly related to their relationship with these traditional systems. Simultaneously, the label of "marginal" allows these youths to exist outside the confines of normal society, interacting with it but without the restraints of blind obedience to its rules. An advantage is born here, one that is often used by authors such as Ishida Ira in the creation of characters for their stories: marginal youth have the ability to form their own sets of rules or values, allowing for a more drastic change in

social norms than regular society would allow. Not that these self-conceived rules and values are always necessarily good; there is, however, the potential for positive change.

The first social alternative which is found in many of these characters is a new stress on individual strengths and abilities. As has slowly become the new trend in Japanese businesses, perhaps it is a reliance on personal ability which can help overcome the current economic slump in Japan. Associated with this is the downfall of the *gakkōka*-induced valuation system and the rise of a new set of values that stress ability and personal performance. The second potential alternative presented is to acknowledge the strengths and skills of women workers. By representing young women in particular as strong and having the ability to take control of their own lives, both in a personal and professional context, Ishida and authors like him are perhaps suggesting that it is time to break down some of the gender barriers in all aspects of Japanese society, be it education, employment, or elsewhere. These are just two of the main threads within the Ikebukuro West Gate Park series; naturally there are many more specific ideas to be seen within the series, not to mention alternatives presented by different authors in their own works. In short, by creating stories with marginal youth as protagonists and venturing to portray them in a different way than traditionally viewed in the media, youth outside the confines of traditional social systems may be a vehicle for authors of popular fiction to address current social problems while at the same time offer their own opinions or suggestions about possible solutions to those problems.

Many contemporary popular fiction authors, like Ishida Ira, use the potential of their writings (and popular fiction) to spread their own, different perspectives on marginal youth to large numbers of people. Ishida and his contemporaries are using

their medium to create a new, more positive portrayal of marginal youth, one where marginal youth is seen as potential, reflecting new possibilities beyond the boundaries set by traditional social systems, and by showing ways around the failing institutions and alternative means to a productive society. These writers use marginal youth to examine options, and to do this they must first change the common representations of and public perspectives on marginal youth in Japan, and, in fact, youth in Japan in general, from a group of people to be scared of and despised to a possibly positive influence on the future of Japan. First and foremost, however, these authors are trying to convey the message that there exist many problems in contemporary Japanese society which need to be examined, and not necessarily all from the viewpoints of the mass media. In writing about marginal youth within a corrupted environment of failing institutions, they turn the readers' focus to these particular problems. At the same time they draw a contrastive picture of youth to the portrayal by the media, both in an attempt to create discussion outside of the media-image and to explore the positive side of marginal youth, including the potential answers they hold in dealing with the problems inherent in contemporary Japanese society for the future.

Questions and Topics for Further Consideration

In attempting to reveal how and why authors of contemporary Japanese popular fiction write about marginal youth, in regards to both their overall message and the reasons for their new, more positive portrayals, there are many questions that I was only able to give a cursory examination and many topics which briefly came up in discussion, but that I was not able to develop fully. As with all research of this nature, a

quick glimpse into one specific area yields more questions than answers. Certainly while writing I discovered the endless off-shoots, related fields of study, and digressions that could be made from a topic as broad as the representation of marginal youth. In this section I will attempt to collect many of the major issues that could be examined to further this study, as well as additional topics and questions that I discovered while writing and believe would be interesting areas for additional work.

By far the largest deficiency in this thesis is the fact that in researching about the representation of marginal youth in contemporary popular Japanese fiction I was only able to use one author as representative for all authors of popular fiction. In order for this study to be truly conclusive, several more authors and their works should be explored in a similar way, looking into their representations of marginal youth (or even youth in general), and followed by a comparison of all the findings. A good example of another author of popular fiction who writes in a very similar style to Ishida Ira and whose works contain related topics is Kaneshiro Kazuki in his *The Zombies* series, a collection of short and book-length stories about a group of marginal youth out to change their lives and the lives of the people around them one “incident” at a time. For each such author, issues including their portrayal of marginal youth, how these portrayals differ from traditional stereotypes, to what degree they keep with or work to break said stereotypes, what their view of society and traditional social structures is (as background for the stories and actions of the marginal characters), among other questions, should be included in the study. Since popular fiction covers such a wide array of works, authors writing in several different genres should be examined, and comparative analysis between genres should also be considered. Although the focus of

this study is contemporary fiction, a look at the change in the portrayal of marginal youth in popular fiction over time, including tendencies in representation and in the change of that representation, might also yield interesting results. If comparative studies of this nature were to be done, including comparison on the international scale might be worthwhile as well.

There were several issues that I very briefly included in this thesis that deserve more in-depth examination. The first is masculinity in Japan – a huge topic I have come to find – including contemporary views on masculinity, stereotypes, issues of masculinity and marginal youth, and the portrayal of masculinity in fiction. Likewise, issues of women in contemporary Japan, including work, lifestyles, sexuality, and the common representation of these in popular fiction. In order to clearly see the difference in the representation of marginal youth in popular fiction and how they are portrayed elsewhere, further examination into views and portrayals of youth and marginal youth in all forms of media, including non-literary works, and the views and representation of marginality (in general) in Japan, both in and out of the field of literature is also needed. Since this thesis deals so much with countering media portrayals of marginal youth, the more actual referents the better. Last, there is a huge amount of work being done, especially in Japan, on youth and society, only a few participants of which I was able to bring into my discussion (Miyadai Shinji, for example). For a larger study of the representation of marginal youth in popular fiction, a more in-depth look at all of the arguments available would be preferable.

Through this thesis I came to realize the breadth of issues connected with youth studies and the innumerable angles from which to examine the topic. My method was

fairly straightforward, exploring marginal youth in Japan as seen in one specific kind of literature, and including extra issues as I came to them, only in enough depth to continue with my own objective. Due to this broad approach I was not able to focus on any one area in particular, but it is helpful I feel to realize that those very specific areas of study exist and could be useful for either myself or another scholar in attempting to further research the topic of marginal youth in popular Japanese fiction and the motivation and message of the contemporary authors who write about them.

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