

Little White Lies

By Ato Ekusa

The Japanese have a special fondness for presenting one another with gifts. Besides birthdays and other special occasions, they now do so four times a year—in the summer and at the year's end, which are traditional gift-giving seasons; on St. Valentine's Day, which falls on February 14; and on "White Day," a uniquely Japanese occasion that falls on March 14.

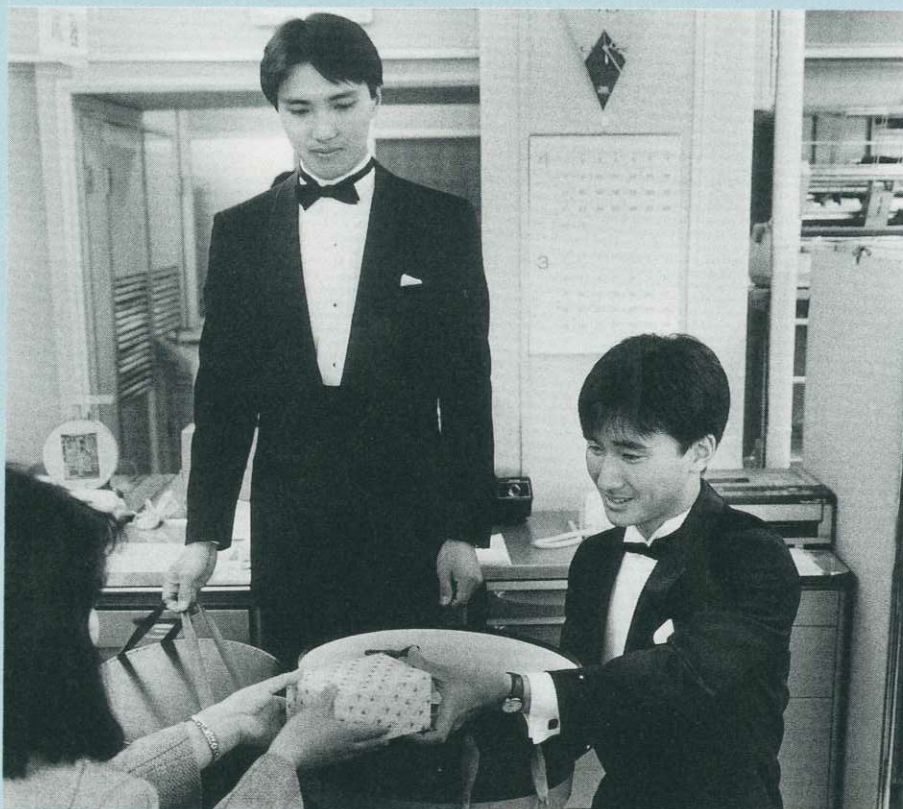
During the summer and year-end gift-giving seasons, people send presents to their seniors and to other acquaintances to whom they are indebted for some reason or other. Department stores chalk up about one-third of their annual sales on these two occasions alone.

St. Valentine's Day, which has been popular in Europe and America since the early 20th century, first came to Japan in 1958, when a firm called Mary Chocolate Co. in Tokyo launched a sales campaign urging young women to express their love for the man in their life by presenting him with chocolate on February 14.

The Japanese being such good imitators of foreign ways, the custom caught on, and St. Valentine's Day became increasingly popular by the year. Japanese women now present chocolate not only to their sweetheart but also to their seniors and colleagues at work and to family members; such a present is called *giri-choko* (obligatory chocolate). St. Valentine's Day in Japan has grown into a market worth ¥100 billion (\$667 million at the rate of ¥150/\$).

And then came White Day. For a man to receive chocolate from a woman but not to give anything in return goes against Japanese etiquette. So another chocolate manufacturer launched a sales campaign encouraging men to return a woman's expression of affection by presenting her a month later with milk chocolate—hence the term White Day.

White Day gained popularity in Japan about five years ago. For about a week before March 14, department stores in Tokyo set up elaborate displays of gift-wrapped chocolate that attract large numbers of male shoppers. And not only chocolate: White Day gifts now consist also of candies, cookies, and a variety of other items. With the Japanese taste for



"Tuxedo boys" sent by a Tokyo department store to deliver a gift at a customer's request on White Day — one of the many tactics to win business in the lucrative gift market.

imported goods in mind, Takashimaya department store this year offered expensive imported chocolate from France, West Germany, the United States and Switzerland.

Gifts do not stop at edibles, either. A popular present for an intimate female friend is a pair of panties, stuffed into a wine glass or a high-heeled shoe made of glass and costing from ¥1,000 to ¥1,500 (\$6–10). For shy men who cannot pluck up the courage to make such a purchase from a female shop clerk, gift panties are even available from vending machines. Apparently Japanese women do not recoil at such a gift.

Another popular present is a pair of gold pendants, one for St. Valentine's Day and one for White Day, sold by Seibu department store. Inscribed with the words "eternal love," the pendant head, shaped like a candy, weighs 3 grams, comes in six types, and this year cost ¥17,000 (\$113).

Shipping companies have been sailing

with the breeze, too. This year Company Sealine Tokyo offered a special White Day cruise with dinner in Tokyo Bay, which proved extremely popular despite the fact that it is still chilly in the bay in March. The dinner cruise aboard the *Symphony* cost ¥14,000 (\$93) per person.

With the price of a White Day gift expected to be about three times—some people say 10 times—more than the price of a St. Valentine's Day present, March 14 offers businesses an excellent opportunity to cash in on a bit of romance.

But not everything is rosy. Spare a thought for those men who received *giri-choko* on February 14 and had to present expensive gifts in return. For them, White Day was probably nothing but blue.

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