

let's dating

my funny valentine, or how to celebrate v-day the j-way

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As with many adaptations of Western culture, the Japanese interpretation of Valentine's Day is not quite what you'd expect. In the egalitarian celebrations of my youth, we spent the better part of the day creating heart-shaped envelopes to affix to our desks. We'd then walk around the room, personally delivering Valentines to each of our classmates. The holiday was always something to look forward to because you knew you'd get cards from everyone, plus a week's supply of Sweet Tarts and candy hearts. If you were lucky, you might even get an extra-special card from that one person who made your eyes turn to hearts - like in the cartoons - making the day that much sweeter. Even when we got to the age where we stopped handing out cards indiscriminately, if you were part of a couple, both parties were expected to participate.

Japanese V-Day, on the other hand, is painfully lopsided. Girls do all the giving, and it's not just cutesy little cards we're talking about here. Oh no, you've got to spend the big bucks on designer chocolate (or spend hours making your own) to show someone how much you care. Even when you *don't* care, women are expected to give *giri choco* to all their male coworkers. I'm not sure what the reasoning is behind this, other than to help fuel the cheap chocolate economy.

I've learned the hard way that when it comes to Japanese holidays, sometimes it's better *not* to play by the rules. The first time I attempted to do V-Day the "J-way" was my second year in Japan. I'd been secretly (or so I thought) crushing on Mr. New Guy, one of the cute staff members at my school. A week or so before the big day, one of the female receptionists pulled me into the closet and slyly suggested, "You should give Mr. New Guy chocolate for Valentine's Day." At first I protested, but she insisted, "He really wants you to." I agonized for the rest of the week over what to give him, figuring this would be my big gesture to show him how I felt. I didn't want to overdo it, so I settled on Hershey's Kisses with a handwritten card, figuring it was the perfect balance of store-bought and well-thought-out. When I presented them to him on the morning of the 14th, he smiled, said "Thank you", and that was the end of it. He never asked me out and didn't give me anything in return on White Day. In fact, he barely spoke to me after the event. I think it all came down to a misinterpretation: I took my coworker's suggestion to mean that Mr. New Guy really wanted *me* to give him chocolate, but I think what she really meant was he really wanted me to give him *chocolate*.

The previous year, I'd had a very unconventional, but surprisingly pleasant Valentine's Day with - of all people - my ex, SM, and I had called it quits a month or so before (or, if you recall, he had ended things in a text message), but we were still in touch. We had by no means planned to have a romantic Valentine's Day together, but I needed his help to return a gas burner at an electronics store (don't ask) and we just happened to plan this adventure on February 14th. We returned said burner and then realized that we were both hungry, so we headed around the corner to a cozy little Nepalese restaurant where we had the kind of open-hearted conversation that is sometimes hard to have when you're dating someone. It felt like since we were no longer officially together, the pressure had been removed, and we were free to hang out as, gasp, friends. It was totally unexpected and unequivocally non-romantic, but somehow it worked.

When SC (my current squeeze) and I began dating, we talked a little bit about our V-Day expectations beforehand. He was still reeling from the shock (and delight, I believe) from a few months earlier, when I hadn't asked for diamond jewelry or designer handbags for Christmas. We decided that we'd celebrate the day in kind of an offbeat way, so we exchanged unusual gifts like a rapping cookie jar and a shark-shaped knife sharpener. We also didn't insist on über-romantic dinners in ridiculously expensive restaurants, figuring that just spending some time together was the point. It may not be the way that the majority of Japanese couples spend the day, but it works for us.

And, well, it could always be worse. I have a foreign friend whose Japanese girlfriend insisted they celebrate both "Western-style Valentine's Day" and White Day, basically ensuring that she got an extra round of high-quality presents and chocolates every year. But hey, as long as your wallet (and your waistline) can take it, there's nothing wrong with that. Happy Valentine's Day, in whatever way you decide to celebrate it.



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