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# A PERFECT DAY TO BE ALONE

Nanae Aoyama

*Translated from the Japanese by  
Jesse Kirkwood*



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## SPRING



It was raining when I arrived at the house.

The walls of my room were lined with cat photos, set in fancy frames just below the ceiling. They started on the left as you went in, continued above the window on the far side of the room and extended halfway down the right-hand wall. I didn't feel like counting them. Some were black and white and others colour. Some looked off to one side, while others seemed to stare me right in the eye. The whole room had the austere atmosphere of a family altar. I just stood there in the doorway.

"This is nice." I felt a tug on my crochet scarf and turned around to find the little old lady leaning in and squinting to inspect the stitching.

I pulled the cord for the ceiling light. *Ker-chick*. Fluorescent light filled the room. Standing by her at the window she'd opened, I looked out over the hedge of the

small garden. On the other side of the narrow street I could see the station platform. A mild breeze was blowing, and a fine drizzle caressed my face.

For a moment, we just stood there in silence. Then there was a chime, followed by a platform announcement.

“Train’s coming,” she said. The deep, pale wrinkles that lined her face seemed suddenly more pronounced, and I backed away from her slightly.

“Well, this is your room,” she said, and walked off, just like that.

I remember thinking: She looks like she’s barely got a week to live.

I hadn’t bothered introducing myself properly when I arrived. It had just seemed too embarrassing. I wasn’t in the habit of going around declaring my name to people like that. Nor was I used to others actually calling me by it.

From the small station, I had followed the map my mum had drawn for me, making my way to the house as slowly as I could. My hair was damp from the drizzle and stuck to my cheeks. Even in my woollen winter cardigan, scarf wrapped tightly around my neck, I felt a chill. It was the middle of April, but there still hadn’t been a single warm day all year. I set my duffle bag down on the side of the road and tried to find my folding umbrella, but it had disappeared among the densely packed layers of clothes and cosmetics. As I rummaged around in the bag, the

tissues I had squeezed in at the last minute went scattering across the pavement.

My mum’s map looked like she’d copied it straight from a street atlas: even the smallest alleyways were there in painstaking detail. Below, in her old-fashioned rounded handwriting, she’d left me a series of unnecessarily detailed instructions – things like *Leave the station by the north exit and go straight down the shopping arcade*, or *Turn left at the corner with the orthopaedic clinic*. I wrinkled my nose. Clearly she still worried about me, whatever she might say. It didn’t matter that I’d turned twenty: to her, I was still a naïve young woman, the kind who’d get all anxious and emotional as soon as she was left to fend for herself. When I imagined her sitting in the dimly lit living room after I’d gone to bed, writing out these directions and thinking to herself ah, yes, now *this* is motherly love, I couldn’t help smirking.

The damp air had turned the cheap copy paper soggy. I rubbed it with the side of my thumb, so that the writing smudged. Then I rubbed it some more, using my whole hand this time, until all that was left was a grey smear.

I’d said goodbye to my mum that morning at Shinjuku station. “Take care then,” she’d said, patting my head and shoulders. I just muttered “Mm-hm” over and over, scratching my bottom, with no idea where to look. We were standing right in front of the ticket gates, and commuters kept jostling us and glaring as they passed. I tried to take her by the arm and move us out of the

way, but she seemed to have stiffened up. I pretended not to notice and glanced at the departure board above the ticket gates. Then, before she could say whatever it was she was about to say, I blurted out, "Well, good luck with everything!" and, with a quick wave, hurried off through the ticket gate, down the stairs, and onto the train. Even after the train picked up speed, I could feel her eyes boring into me from behind.

Walking from the station to the house, I passed three middle-aged women coming the other way. With their fluttering white blouses and shoulder-padded jackets, they looked like they were off to shop at a department store or something. They were walking side by side, even though that meant they couldn't all fit on the pavement. As I passed them, I caught a strong whiff of perfume. It was not unpleasant: artificial, cloying, and yet somehow nostalgic. I felt suddenly lonely, in the anxious way that nostalgia always seemed to trigger. The shoes they were all wearing, more like indoor slippers really, looked incredibly comfortable. Glancing at a nearby shoe shop, I saw several similar pairs lined up in the window.

I turned at the orthopaedic clinic, walked down several narrow alleys, and at the end of the last one found the house. The gate's paint was peeling, and from it hung a red basket that seemed to serve as a letterbox. Though the house stood directly opposite one end of the station platform, you had to take the long way round and walk down the shopping arcade to reach it. There was also

a path that ran parallel to the platform, but the garden hedge prevented access to the house from that side.

There was no sign outside to indicate who lived there. On the other side of the gate, a path led to the back garden, though half of it was taken up by plant pots of various sizes that seemed to be filled with nothing but soil. Like the gate, the walls of the house were peeling, creating a mottle of red and black. On one side of the front door was a recessed grey washbasin and a stack of buckets. On the other stood a camellia tree so tall its branches brushed against the roof of the single-storey house. It was oddly magnificent, its dark green leaves glistening in the rain, dotted with large pink flowers. I hadn't realised they bloomed at this time of year.

*I don't want to go in.* I tried saying the words out loud, like I really meant them, but as soon as they left my mouth they sounded false. The fact was, I didn't really care. It wasn't even a question of wanting or not wanting to go in. I'd been told to come, so here I was. And, if it meant I could live in Tokyo, anywhere would do.

After showing me to my room, the old lady brought me some tea and then set about various tasks: helping me unpack the cardboard boxes I'd had delivered earlier, starting the washing machine, making dinner, running the bath. While we were unpacking the boxes, we made small talk about the weather and how safe the area was. I didn't exactly try to get the conversation flowing.

Watching her from behind as she extracted my clothes from the boxes, unfolding and then refolding them, I told myself, with a wince, that she was probably going to require some looking after.

Just as the conversation had fizzled out and an awkward silence was looming, she left the room. I breathed in deep, right into the pit of my stomach, then out again. I stayed in the room until she called to say it was time to eat.

Dinner turned out to be pretty plain and insubstantial.

“Want some more?”

“Oh – please.”

I gave her my bowl. It came back piled high with rice.

“Glad to see you can eat.”

“Um, yeah . . .” I replied, taking the bowl and tucking in. A few more side dishes wouldn’t have gone amiss, I thought.

“I eat plenty myself too, mind!” she exclaimed, heaping rice into her own bowl. I made another interested noise while I crunched on a pickle.

“Shall I put the television on?”

I found myself staring at the wrinkles on her hand as she scrabbled for the remote control.

“Not that there’s much on . . .”

She flicked through the channels for a while before eventually settling on a baseball game. Then she carried on eating without giving the television a second glance.

At her age, I thought, listening was probably more fun than watching.

Instead of chomping away noisily at her food, she ate quietly. I didn’t know much about how old people lived, but I’d come here determined not to be fazed by any generation gap between us. And yet she was turning out to be surprisingly normal. For dessert, she brought out some home-made coffee flavour jellies, drizzling a spiral of creamer onto them in what was clearly a well-practised motion.

After dinner, I stayed under the kotatsu blanket, though its built-in heater wasn’t on. I gazed mindlessly at the television for a while, then tried to read the book I’d brought with me. What exactly were you supposed to talk about on your first night at someone’s house? I found myself re-reading the same line over and over.

It still didn’t feel like I was actually going to live with her. Even though I’d shown up here of my own accord, I felt intensely uncomfortable, like a kid who’s been left at a neighbour’s house until dinner.

On the television, the commentator was blabbering away excitedly.

“You a baseball fan, Chizu?”

Hearing my own name gave me a jolt. It had been a while since someone actually called me by it, and it put me on edge, like some kind of bad omen.

“Actually I . . . don’t know much about it.”

“Oh! *Now* you tell me.”

I laughed awkwardly in response.

"I thought it might be something you'd enjoy," she said before abruptly turning off the television. Then she reached into the pocket of her smock for her knitting needles and wool and began working away at a small ball-like object.

On the table was a dessert plate piled with salami sticks. I was already full, but the silence was unbearable and I didn't know what else to do with myself, so I nibbled on one. Its salty flavour filled my mouth. When one of her cats showed up and started mewing, she spat the stick she was chewing on into her hand and fed it to the animal.

"Hope you won't mind living with an old crone like me. My name's Ginko Ogino, by the way."

So now we were doing introductions. I jumped at the chance to revive the conversation.

"Chizu Mita. Thank you for letting me stay."

"So, do you mind if I go ahead and jump in?"

"Sorry?"

"The bath. I like to go first."

"Oh. Sure, go ahead."

"Then I'll hop right in."

Once she'd left the room, I lay down on the floor where I'd been sitting. At least she doesn't seem too uptight, I thought, beginning to relax slightly. It was going to make things a lot easier if, instead of fussing over me, she just treated me like a daughter who had overstayed her

welcome in the parental nest. Cringing as I noticed the vague smile still plastered across my face, I tugged my cheeks back into a more normal position. The ginger cat that had eaten the salami stick was eyeing me warily from the corner of the room.

As soon as I heard the sound of water slopping around in the bathroom, I set about rooting through all the drawers I could find, starting in the kitchen. None of them were particularly full; instead, each seemed to house its own modest collection of objects. The one under the sink was empty except for two pairs of cooking chopsticks. In the underfloor storage space I found three large bottles of what looked like home-distilled plum wine. The date *21 June '95* had been scrawled with a marker on each of their red plastic caps.

While I was at it, I decided to have a look in her room, across the corridor from my own. Alongside the brown, chequered curtains dangled a string of faded paper cranes. Looking closer, I realised they were all made from what looked like old pamphlets of some kind. I gave them a quick shake, producing a swirl of dust. There was also a small Buddhist altar, but I tried not to look at that too closely.

On top of a small chest of drawers was a glass cabinet. Inside, behind tight ranks of miniature old-fashioned cars, a Tokyo Tower replica and a model of some castle or other, there was a set of those Russian dolls. The ones where each doll contains another doll inside it – what