

A Perfect Day to Be Alone

Nanae Aoyama

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In Nanae Aoyama's droll novella *A Perfect Day to Be Alone*, an indecisive girl cohabitates with a woman who challenges her preconceptions and directionlessness.

Twenty-year-old Chizu is ill-employed and hard to impress. She wants to be left alone but is terrified of being forgettable. When Yohei, her indifferent boyfriend of two-plus years, fades from her life, she replaces him with a train station attendant, Fujita, who's just as unreachable. Her mother leaves to teach in China, prodding Chizu to be more ambitious.

Wanting to live in Tokyo but with few good options for doing so, Chizu moves in with Ginko, an offbeat distant relation in her seventies, reasoning that "anywhere would do." Once this wish is fulfilled, though, her truer craving—for discomfort, even discord, to shake her from the blankness of her days—resurfaces: "I wanted to pound madly on the keys of a piano. Burn all the clothes in my drawers. Toss all my jewelry from the top of some tall building. Smoke ten cigarettes at once."

The story unfolds like a passive tragedy, inviting ire, empathy, and amusement. Chizu is a trying and pitiable narrator who finds the perfect foil for her practiced apathy in Ginko, who is placid, kind, and patient across the four seasons they spend together. Still, Chizu is uncharitable in her observations of Ginko's behaviors, relationships, and age, all while posturing indifference to Ginko's thoughts about her. Feeling unable to rankle her host, Chizu pilfers items from Ginko's home—one among several bad habits that she nurtures to feel young and alive. She believes herself to be worldly and wise, but Ginko has seen this act before.

A voyeuristic record of a girl's thorny settling in to someone else's space, *A Perfect Day to Be Alone* is a sharp novella about a purposefully delayed coming-of-age.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2025)

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