



Perfect

by Jane Stark

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My husband is in love with Ruby Thompson. He comes home and I rush to kiss him in order to catch traces of her on his neck. I can almost see her face, in profile, in both his eyes, as though he's wearing cameos instead of contact lenses. Ruby Thompson, our friend, lives twenty city blocks away in a building with old Spanish tiles on the walls of the entrance. When Ruby used to greet me, she kissed both my cheeks with half her mouth and held my hands close to her heart, as though they were important. Her husband, Leonard, is a collector and everything they own is valuable, except for the leaves Ruby dried and placed in small square frames. We think they're rich but Ruby cleans her apartment herself, because their possessions are too precious to be handled by strangers.

My husband's in love with Ruby Thompson and I don't blame him. No matter how close I stand to her, she's perfect, like a small tree, deliberately planted. Her arms, uncovered in the summer, curve like limbs in a painting by Renoir. My husband can't believe his good fortune, he always considered himself ordinary.

I don't really rush towards Dan. I move as though I'm simmering with resentment when I've been waiting with excitement. I've always described my life aloud to myself, in my head. As a child, I didn't walk a block without imagining I crossed a perilous tightrope. Inventing make-believe danger was a habit I developed during Saturday afternoons that hung over me, as still as the dust particles above my bed.

"Natalie," Danny says as he pulls my arms from his neck. He knows my interest is the price he has to pay. Every time we touch now I feel like we're in a movie, all our exchanges have become important. He's wearing the black jeans and sweater I bought him. Danny doesn't care about clothes but everything looks good on him.

"Are you hungry?" There wouldn't have been time for them to eat because Ruby has an eight-year old son, Thomas, who needs his dinner. Ruby and I, more connected than ever, don't see each other anymore.

"No thanks," Danny says, as though he has to hide his hunger from me because he's no longer entitled to the food I've prepared. I follow him into the bedroom where he collapses on the bed, fully dressed. I wonder if he'll notice that I cut my hair.

"Your mother called," I tell him. "She wants to know if we're coming for Thanksgiving." Both Danny and I are only children and our presence means everything to his mother, less to mine. Danny rolls on his side and groans. He rubs his face with his hands, as though he's removing the echo of Ruby's mouth with his palms.

"I didn't say anything," I tell him, as though the two of us are in collusion. He groans again, smothering his impatience with me. I watch him squirm because everything revolves around him and Ruby now. An unseen bed has become the axis of our lives.

Danny and I have been together for fifteen years, since college in Denver when I lived in a house that included his girlfriend who wore perfume and worked as a model for a local department store during Christmas. I had the habit of gathering my hair in barrettes without looking in a mirror and I was surprised when he chose me. My face is long and narrow and if I don't have some color on my lips people asked me if I'm tired. All my life I've heard that my eyes are my best feature and why don't I smile more. We've been married for ten years but I forget that he's handsome until someone mentions it.

In college we agreed that man was innately good and civilization inherently evil. We agreed that great things were achieved in between the selfish twists and turns that profited few and enslaved many. We were in no hurry to have children, but neither of us wanted to be old and feel we missed out on something. We connected in parts. When we made love, I pictured myself as a magician's assistant in a box rolled on stage, separated and put together again with no harm done. Danny made friends for us but we rarely entertained.

I met Ruby first, when she admired the bird of paradise embroidered on the back of my felt coat. She spoke to me in the elevator of the building in Manhattan where we worked for the same magazine, Ruby, upstairs in the art department and me, on the second floor, in subscriptions. I had the card with the designer's name in my pocket and I gave it to her. A month later she stopped on my floor and suggested we meet at a crafts fair. I didn't tell Ruby I only purchased the exotic coat because of a birthday check from my parents, or that I kept it in my bedroom closet for weeks before I had the courage to wear it or show it to Danny. Danny had laughed at me when I bought a pastel green dress, saying I looked like a mint. He said fashion was a form of oppression.

That day at the fair, I watched Ruby handle each object as though it was meaningful, boxes made of exotic wood so thick there was little room for anything inside, transparent blouses of iridescent fabric and embroidered slippers with soles like paper that wouldn't last a week in an uncarpeted apartment. Danny would have described it as clothing for rich people who wanted to look like peasants.

Ruby and I couldn't find the woman who made my coat but we stopped at the stall of a hat maker whose booth seemed part of a bazaar in a foreign country, the lightweight hats incongruous in the winter chill. The woman shook her head when I picked up a delicate black hat with silk flowers and said, "Not for you." I picked up another and she shook her head again, without looking at me, "Your face too long."

Her unidentifiable accent made her words seem like a pronouncement. She reminded me of my mother who always advised me to look in the mirror as though I was a stranger to myself. My mother was from Hungary and embarrassed by her accent, preferred to speak in short sentences when we were in public. My father was an engineer for an oil company and lived far from us most of the time. Despite my parents' connection to exotic places, there was nothing foreign in our home. My father's frequent absences made our life oddly quiet but whenever he joined us, I was eager for him to leave. My mother worried about his meals, his clothes, and how he slept. At the dinner table, as I listened to him chew and swallow, my mother at his elbow, I heard the sound of trains wheels, urging him to get out, get out. It was Danny who taught me how to swim and drive a car.

I wouldn't have the nerve to wear the hats anyway. When I was eight, I desperately wanted a raincoat covered with small turquoise cats and dogs that I saw in a store. My mother bought me the coat, but on every rainy day, I refused to wear it, certain I'd be a figure of derision. The hat seller nodded at Ruby whose dark gold curls slid under each hat she tried on, every brim an appropriate frame for her small-featured face. The woman nodded at Ruby. "For her. Good for her."

Ruby tilted her head and examined my face. "Too frivolous for you, Natalie. You're so Modigliani." She bought a straw hat with seed pearls embroidered around the brim. "Totally useless," she said and grabbed my hand. "Let's find a scarf for that gorgeous neck."

At work, I would wait for Ruby to stop by my cubicle, instead of going out with the few women I sometimes had lunch alongside of at the coffee shop downstairs. I met Thomas for the first time when Ruby brought him to work. He sat between us in the restaurant, a miniature Ruby except for cheeks like small apples. I admired how Ruby gave Thomas choices, as though he was another adult, important to please. Over his head, Ruby told me he had begun his own collection of metal trains, all

manufactured before he was born. When we reached the sidewalk, he walked between us and connected our hands. There was a table of toys being sold on the sidewalk outside of a subway station. I picked up a small train and offered it to Thomas who examined it carefully before returning it to me. "No thank you," he said.

"Plastic makes his father shudder," Ruby told me.

Realizing it was a cheaply made piece, the windows and wheels painted on the side, I stuffed my hands in my pockets, as though I had made a mistake. Ruby, darting like a bird, kissed me quickly on the cheek. "You're very generous, Natalie. Thank you."

On Saturdays, I'd meet Ruby at specialty food stores where I'd follow her around and duplicate her purchases. She taught me how to twist my hair on my head with tortoiseshell ornaments that Danny called chopsticks. Ruby knew something about everything.

"You should wear your hair short, Natalie. Your face deserves to be framed," Ruby said, as though it was a fact and not a compliment. I didn't tell her I wouldn't because Danny hated change, no matter how small.

We arranged to meet for drinks with our husbands. I was eager to introduce Ruby to Danny, as though I had accomplished something special. Ruby wore the hat that we bought together at the crafts fair. "Leonard, this is my Natalie," Ruby told her husband as the four of us stood on the corner of an intersection, the city traffic unusually muted. I was embarrassed, certain Leonard wouldn't see anything special about me. Although Danny and I were tall, Leonard was taller and he took Ruby's arm as we crossed the street.

Despite our dinners together, I remained shy with Leonard, who made his living by putting a value on things he'd never seen before. Often we'd meet at Ruby's apartment where she cooked for us. After we'd eaten and the men were in another room, the heat of the kitchen would mix with the smell of roasted meat and the extra wine we shared, until we were encased in a small burgundy cloud. She would laugh when I opened the cabinet doors in her kitchen in order to see the shopping bags, neatly folded and put away, upright, like files.

One afternoon, we played a board game with Thomas on the floor of their living room. Ruby, who was sitting cross-legged, stretched out her legs and lay back on the gold patterned rug that was so old we had to take our shoes off when we came into the room. The tiny red flowers of her long skirt merged with the faded blooms of the carpet. Thomas came back from the bathroom carrying an open umbrella decorated with small firemen. I lay down and whispered to Ruby because I didn't want to scare him, "That's bad luck."

"Superstition is just anxiety, Natalie," she said, and reached across the board game to pick up my hand as though I was Thomas, needing reassurance. There were sharp metal pieces from the game under my arm but I didn't want to move in case she took her hand back. Her skin felt warm and cool at the same time. We lay without speaking until Thomas wriggled between us, pushing the game away with his feet. We tickled him as he squealed, little warm puffs of his breath reaching our faces. Then Ruby stretched her arms and sat up, shaking her head, like a delicate dog rising from a nap.

Ruby's husband has become pale, he's afraid to leave her while he travels for business. I know this from Danny, who has no choice but to answer my questions. Yesterday, Leonard walked past me on the street, quickly, as though I was the one who hurt him. For the first time I feel we have something in common.

We were eating in a noisy dark restaurant the evening I found out about Danny and Ruby. Leonard had recounted the story of a recent acquisition to Danny, who's a history teacher in a private high school. The restaurant was small with a cavernous ceiling dangling elaborate chandeliers that gave little light. The waiters moved around the tables, their upper bodies bowed by the weight of the large plates they carried in their hurry to reach us. The bold colors of the walls and food wrapped around the four of us like fabric.

Leonard described a tiny jug purported to having been owned by a pharaoh whose symbol of a snake was engraved in the pottery. Leonard wore a gray jacket without a collar or buttons and said he would sell the piece at a silent auction because there may have been archeological improprieties. It was fitting, Danny said, that the bits and pieces that belonged to the original sons of bitches should be dug up and possessed all over again by new sons of bitches. He said there was a comfort in world history being reduced to an episode of the Twilight Zone. Leonard looked annoyed when Ruby and I couldn't stop laughing. We had drunk a lot of wine. When Danny reached across the table with both hands, touching our faces at the same time, I felt Ruby's cheek through the warmth of his palm.

After dinner we went home to our one-bedroom apartment that Danny's grandfather had first rented over fifty years ago. An ugly white railing separated the foyer and a sunken living room that made the few visitors we had exclaim about the possibilities. I had planned to replace the railing with something made of bamboo and turn the living room into the inside of an Arabian tent but I never did. Once I bought red and gold striped pillows to place on the floor but Danny complained until I returned them.

That night Danny sat on the end of our unmade bed, still wearing what we called his all-purpose sports jacket, and said, "Leonard's a pillager. He's a Roman sacking the Greeks."

Easy come, easy go, was what Danny and I used to say to each other about money. I squatted in front of him, backwards, so he could unzip the dress I had worn because we were meeting Ruby and Leonard. Ruby and I thought Japanese women were the best dressed in the city, with their slim suits and expensive handbags.

"I'm sorry, Natalie," Danny said.

I thought he couldn't get my zipper open.

"Try it again, Danny, just try it." But he stood and putting his arms around my shoulders, gently pushed me down until I sat on the bed. I felt guided, like a child. Then he moved away and told me he was in love, really in love, with Ruby.

"I'm not going to leave you," he said. "Nobody's leaving anybody."

At first I thought he referred to another woman that just happened to have Ruby's name. Then I realized he meant our friend, Ruby, who we had just left in the expensive restaurant where Leonard insisted on paying the check, perhaps because of the archeological improprieties.

“This is something that just happened,” Danny said. “We don’t know where it’s going or how it will play out.”

I knew I should ask if Leonard knew and if they had already slept together. But I couldn’t say anything. Speech felt like a foreign language.

“Ruby feels terrible about it, Natalie,” Danny said as he paced the few empty feet on the side of the bed. “She says hurting you is the worst part. Worse than hurting Leonard or her marriage.”

I pictured Danny and Ruby discussing my feelings as though I sat between them. Knowing I had something that Ruby wanted made me feel like a stranger to myself. The more Danny watched me, the less I was able to speak.

“Do you want me to sleep on the couch?” he asked, “Because I will”

I told him to stay in the bedroom. I wanted to run to the phone but realized there was no point. Ruby already knew what I was going to tell her. I sat in the living room, pulling at the threads of the Indian print bedspread that covered the couch, unraveling my only attempt to brighten the room that Ruby rarely visited because I preferred to visit her apartment that was like a museum, every item worthy of inspection.

The day before Ruby and I had stood in a crowded store waiting for our coffee beans to be ground. People were moving around us, hurrying to get their shopping done. Ruby had put her arm through mine and leaned her head against my shoulder. I could feel her breathing and I stood still, like a column, upright and exposed after the walls of an ancient house had collapsed. I had imagined my life with Danny dropping away like the walls of that house, our past being buried until the college years were weeds in the ruins.

I went into the bedroom and stood above Danny as he slept. They must meet in Ruby’s apartment while Thomas was at school, Danny’s dark hair mixing with Ruby’s curls on her beautiful linens. I imagined Ruby’s small white hands where mine had been. I felt her pleasure at the surprising silkiness of the skin under the hair on his chest. Very quietly, I lay down beside him, and imagined his familiar hands carrying an impression of my body as they covered Ruby’s slight frame.

When I was eleven years old, in summer camp, I became infatuated with a teenager who had tanned skin and an opal earring. He worked in the kitchen and let me follow him around, helping fill trays with paper cups of dessert. I told everyone he was my boyfriend and embroidered his name on my shirt. I wrote my mother and asked for an opal earring for my birthday.

One night I left my bunk and climbed the stairs to his room where I had never been before. Carrying the bowl I made in the pottery shop, his initials and mine glazed on the bottom, I heard laughter and recognized the voice of the riding instructor, a grown woman with short red hair who was impatient with my fear of the horses. I ran away on tiptoes as though my steps could be heard on the grass. I broke the bowl and ripped the letters from my shirt, leaving an imprint of holes that still spelled his name. At the end of the summer, when I returned home, my mother knew something was wrong. I didn’t tell her what happened because she would say it was my own fault for wearing my heart on my sleeve and not looking before I leapt.

The morning after Dan told me, I put cloth napkins on the table with breakfast, like Ruby would, even though it was only coffee and toast. That’s when everything we said became important, as though part of a play that would be seen by other people. Danny watched me as if I might do something horrifying, or amazing.

“Does this mean Ruby and I can’t be friends anymore?” I finally asked. Danny was

angry because I'm not. He thinks the space Ruby occupies between us is new. I don't tell him it's different because it's Ruby and not a stranger.

In the months since Danny told me, we haven't spoken much to each other. But there's always been a natural silence in our home. We still sleep together because there's no reason not to. Afterwards, I lie awake in our bed that's surrounded by piles of books because neither of us puts things away. Through the open window, the streetlight shines on the dark furniture that belonged to his grandfather. Everything has changed, but nothing is different.

One afternoon I call her from the market where I never see her anymore and we arrange to meet at the playground near her building. Thomas, wearing a bright red scarf, is playing with some boys when I arrive and doesn't see me. Ruby is sitting on a bench holding a container of coffee in both hands as though she has to warm herself. When she sees me she stands and throws the coffee in the garbage where it splatters, some of the liquid reaching her navy wool coat. She runs to put her arms around me.

"I'm so sorry, Natalie. I'm so sorry," Ruby cries as she holds me tightly, the gold curls wiry, not soft as I had imagined, against my mouth. I pat her back gently and she pulls her head away. She seems frail, the beautiful skin translucent instead of porcelain-like.

"I don't know what's going to happen, Natalie." She uses the same phrase that Danny does and I realize they must repeat these words to each other.

"Say something, Natalie, before I burst." She blows her nose with a handkerchief embroidered with blue stitches. "Are you miserable? You have every right to be."

I wait to answer. I have that feeling again, as though there's a camera on me and I want to find words worthy of the attention. I don't tell her that I miss her pulling my hands to her heart, as though that was where we were connected. I don't say that I miss her collection of old teapots, standing like an idle army, in a corner of the dining room where I was once welcome. Instead, I say that I miss Thomas.

"He misses you," she says, but I don't know if it's true. "Do you want to say hello?"

"Not yet. Let's walk a little." Walking beside Ruby still makes me feel strong.

"You cut your hair," She reaches up to touch my hair and I pull my head back, surprising both of us. Ruby puts her hands in her pockets and looks down at the ground. "I'm sorry." She seems disappointed. "You look beautiful," she says.

"I'm thinking of getting my own place," I tell her, imagining it for the first time.

"Does Daniel know?" she asks. I'm confused until I realize my Danny has become her Daniel. He occupies her thoughts now, like Thomas and Leonard.

"I just decided this minute." I imagine an empty room with pale wood floors, without Danny's grandfather's old furniture that never had anything to do with me. "It would be nice to have my own place." I don't say it would be a relief. "You and Thomas could visit after I fix it up."

Ruby looks very upset. "Natalie, please, don't let me ruin your life."

"You haven't. Really."

She's crying again and I bring her back to the bench, as though she's an older relative who needs my help. I think it would be better if I left without Thomas seeing me. Ruby and I don't know how to say goodbye to each other. I put my hand on her shoulder briefly, as though I'm in a hurry to leave.

Outside of the playground an old Chinese man is sitting on the steps of a laundry. He's selling paper kites and small figures covered in brightly colored fabric and feathers. The dolls are flimsily made and I buy two of them, a purchase Danny would consider foolish. For now, I'll keep them in my closet with the bird of paradise coat.

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