

Perfect Family



Jerrie Oughton

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When I began writing this book, I dug out all my high school yearbooks and read the comments my friends had written to me. You cannot see a group of people daily for a five-year period without learning from them. Though *every bit of this novel is fiction*, I drew on the many lessons and memories from the class of 1955 of Needham Broughton High School in Raleigh, North Carolina. Memories of those who, as of this writing, are alive and well, and of those who did not live to the year 2000 but are constant reminders of that last magic time:

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Perfect Family

For Dale, who had nothing to do with this
story and everything to do with family

*There is only one history of any importance . . .
the history of what you once believed and
the history of what you came to believe.*

—Kay Boyle

Part One

I

OVER NEAR THE EAST COAST, IN THE LOWLANDS OF North Carolina, is a small town named Lily. Small towns are notorious for counting on the sting of gossip to shape behavior. This was especially true in the 1950s and Lily was no exception. Gossip worked inside us teenagers, making us fear, according to the old adage, but for the grace of God, there we went.

"And that's why Lydia Meyers is leaving school. Leaving town," my best friend, Trudy Hampton, told me. "Said to somebody she only did it one time. One time!"

"Where's she going?" I asked.

"Nobody's saying, but you can bet she'll stay at least seven or eight months. When and if she comes back, it'll be with a little baby 'cousin.'" Trudy gave a knowing nod that put the finish on that conversation for the moment. Not for good, just for now. We'd get plenty of mileage out

of Lydia Meyers's predicament. Although it only took her one time, if you could believe that.

We were "porch setting" on an April evening, Trudy and I. Not on my front porch but six blocks down on Main Street. On the front porch of Mrs. Canton, the new dress-maker in town. Porch setting, if you do it right, requires periods of quiet where you hear your own thoughts, building a head of steam for the next topic of conversation. We sat quiet, listening to a dog barking two blocks over. The sound was carried in a warm, softened way, not sharp like it is on November nights when the air's so cold that passage through it is clean and fast.

A car turned the corner onto Main and roared down the street toward the house where we sat. Screeched to a halt smack in front of us. The car door slammed and a shadow of a boy came our way.

He paused on the bottom step, taken aback by two strangers on what I guessed was his front porch. Raised his eyebrows, then grinned at the joke he was fixing to ask. "You professional porch setters?"

I didn't offer an answer. Didn't know what to say. We'd been sitting in rockers in the twilight waiting for Mrs. Canton to finish with my prom dress. She had to take it in some in the bodice. That was all. Fifteen minutes, she'd said.

"Why d'ya ask?" I said finally, looking the boy over. Trudy must have been struck dumb she was so quiet.

He sat down in another rocker. "Just wondered."

I kept looking. If he was Mrs. Canton's son, he surely wasn't one bit like her. Muscles pushed out his T-shirt and even by just the street and porch lights you could see enough to know he'd passed a few footballs in his time.

"Are you Mrs. Canton's son?" I thought I'd ask.

"Yep." He rocked slowly. "And you?"

I waited a minute to answer. Not sure if just my name would be enough. He hadn't given us his name. Or maybe I should state my business on his new front porch. New to him, at least. And to his family. Mama had heard a new dressmaker, real reasonable, had moved in not a mile from our house. Just six blocks down on East Main Street in the very opposite direction from us. Not being able to afford a fancy store-bought dress was no longer a problem. Making it was a lot cheaper. That was how I got a prom dress.

"My name's Welcome," I told him. And when he looked up to see if I was joshing him, I added, "Welcome Marie O'Neal. And this is Trudy Hampton."

He stopped rocking and looked me over. Just me.

Mom had let my sister, Evelyn Sue, pick my name. She'd been five at the time I was born. Said she wanted me to always know that, even though I was number three, I was certainly welcome. Never wanted me to forget it. Believe me, I've never once forgotten.

"Strange name." He started up rocking again but didn't take his eyes off of me.

And being as he'd not even given his name, I said, a mite ticked off, "What's yours?" Maybe to see if I could

gawk over his the way he was gawking over mine.

"Nicholas Canton."

He kept on rocking and looking. Mrs. Canton came to the front door, pushed the screen open, and said, "It's all done."

She had it hanging in a dry-cleaning paper as far down as it would go. The net skirt was too full, finally. Its whiteness picked up light like a corona around the moon. All flowing and misty. Even half in paper it was some kind of gown.

"You home?" Mrs. Canton said to Nicholas. "Eaten yet?"

He shook his head.

I thanked her and, as we headed down the porch steps, she called, "Honey, wait. Are you girls gonna walk all the way home in the dark toting that dress? Nicholas here'll give you a lift. You'll do that, won't you? And I'll heat up some supper while you do."

He said, "Where's she live?" like I wasn't even standing there myself. And I said I'd be just fine. Didn't really want to ride with him anyway. He wasn't the friendliest person I'd met that day. But his mama pushed it, so Trudy took off on foot for her house one block over and I laid the dress carefully across the back seat of his '51 Chevy and crawled up front with Mr. Muscle and off we shot.

And I do mean shot. He burned rubber in front of Mrs. Canton's front porch like hell was after him. My head whipped back, and I should have known right then and there this person was probably a bit strange, starting up

conversations with questions about our being professional porch setters. Burning tires to the rim just driving up the street.

"Right up there on the right," I told him. "The white house with the wraparound porch."

"That one on the rise with the glass front door and the chandelier in the front hall?"

I nodded.

"Hardeeharhar," he said and drove right by it.

"But that was it." I had to tell him twice more before he'd believe me and turn around right in the middle of the street and deposit me and my twenty-dollar prom dress.

"Whew, Lordy!" he said, pulling his head back on his neck. "Didn't know I was bringing you home to a pure mansion."

Though we lived in one of the prettier, larger homes on the west end of Main Street, it surely didn't translate into wealth. It was a bargain when my folks bought it a quarter of a century ago and had allowed us to give the illusion of solidarity. Truth be known, we lived from paycheck to paycheck just like everybody else did. Daddy's real estate business had never actually boomed, just crept along keeping us afloat, but not a lot extra was ever forthcoming. It was the family name of O'Neal that set us up as pillars of the community. Been around for over a century.

Well, when Mr. Canton, Mr. Didn't-Want-to-Give-Me-a-Ride-in-the-First-Place, said that about our house being a mansion, I just ignored him. Hopped on out. Prayed he'd

remember I had a dress in the back seat and hold still long enough for me to slide it out of there.

But, even after I'd slammed the back car door and was up on the sidewalk well away from his hot-rodding tires, he sat right there at the curb.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome." Then he added, "Welcome." Like some kind of echo.

I stopped on the first step to the front walk. Looked back at him because he was still sitting there watching me. Maybe it was all those milk shakes I'd been forcing down twice a day that'd given me a little shape and form, finally made me have a figure. Maybe it was because I was wearing black. Always my best color. Or my hair with its henna rinse sort of caught night light.

But none of that. He asked, "What is that smell?"

That took me back.

"What smell?"

"Well if I knew," here he grinned, "I wouldn't be asking now, would I?"

I noticed his ears cupped out a little. Just enough so he wasn't drop-dead-in-your-tracks handsome. A girl wouldn't consider going out with a boy who didn't have a flaw or two.

I looked off to the side. *How'm I to tell him what he's smelling if I don't have a hint?* I saw our neighbor, Miss Wing, move a curtain at her living room window and knew it looked a bit funny to be stalled there in front of

my house, shouting to each other about odors. And what was it he had gotten a whiff of anyway? I mean . . . was it food, or garbage? Was it the river across the street, with its close-to-the-sea smell?

"Oh. I'll bet it's the Cape jasmine bush," I finally said, glad I could help out. Glad to leave the very presence of this peculiar person. "Bye."

He watched me all the way up the front walk. Up the porch steps. To the door. There I turned around and waved him off. And he didn't leave any rubber on our street front either. Drove off right cautiously for a person who had torn up the street not five minutes before. Hot-rodding boy I'd probably never see again that spring of '55. The same spring when another boy, name of Elvis, was gearing up to snarl his way to everlasting fame, but most of us in Lily had barely heard about him yet. New name to us. So was Canton . . . Nicholas Canton. New name.

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I FELT LUCKY TO BE GOING TO THE JUNIOR-SENIOR PROM. A lot of girls didn't have dates, Trudy for one. I thought a lot about Lydia Meyers and felt doubly lucky. There she was, somewhere far from Lily, plunked down in her shame, trying to wait out a baby. And here I was, going to dance the night away with a big, bad senior boy. Actually . . . a short, nice, regular guy.

Randy Newsome was president of the student body of Lily High School. He had been elected in the fall of my sophomore year, 1954, about a week before Hurricane Hazel had ripped through town. We'd all gathered for assembly, innocent as babes, not knowing a storm was brewing somewhere out there in the Atlantic off the coast of Cuba. There we'd sat in the auditorium to listen to the nominees make their speeches before we voted.

Big Man Jones got up. Harold was his given name. He

was our leading scorer on the basketball court and I felt sure he'd probably win the election. The speech he gave was passable. But, to tip the scales, his girlfriend had been giving out fudge in the halls of the school all that week. Wearing a sign that said, "Harold Jones won't fudge on you. VOTE JONES FOR STUDENT GOVERNMENT PRESIDENT." Front and back.

My daddy said he'd disown me if I ran around school with any signs pinned to my person, giving out free candy. "I'll be dadblasted if young people aren't going off the very deep end," he roared over the scrambled eggs Mama had whipped up for breakfast. Made me sorry I'd even shared that wee tidbit of my school life with him.

Grammie, who lived with us six months of the year, chimed in with her favorite phrase, "All going to hell and back in a handbasket." Every time she said that she ducked her head and looked down like mentioning hell was wicked and she was embarrassed at being so bold. But couldn't help it popping out of her.

My older sister, Evelyn Sue, was present at breakfast, but absent. Being twenty hadn't really made her an adult. She sat and stared into space an awful lot for somebody who was supposed to be a grown-up. And she had pictures of movie stars plastered all over the walls of her room. Hadn't settled on a favorite. But you could tell when she got all starry eyed, she was thinking of one of her movie stars. Daddy said she was *gaga*.

But Daddy's ranting that morning flew right over where

Evelyn Sue was resting, deep in thought I guessed, because she kept chewing and staring off out the window.

Daddy ate a few bites, then he flew back in with something about Frank Sinatra crooning out his songs like a hound dog with its tail caught in the truck tailgate. Personally, I thought he sang soft, like lullabies. Johnny Ray was the one who yowled. But, try to convince my daddy. Every chance Daddy got he tried to drag Frank Sinatra into it. Hated the very shoes that man wore. Would love to have blamed Sinatra, along with Eartha Kitt, for every ill the world was beset with.

And he always found some fault with me, too—the way I dressed or wore my hair. Seemed no matter how earnest my efforts, they were never enough. Not even close. My older brother, Julian, out on his own with two children and a wife, could do no wrong. Daddy would say, “Look at Julian now . . .” If I heard it once, I heard it a thousand times. I could never measure up.

Well, Daddy would have loved Randy Newsome’s speech. In fact, did love it when I told him about it at supper that night.

“My kind of guy,” Daddy had roared. “Uses everything God gave him and makes it work for him. He’ll amount to somethin’.”

Grammie and Mama both nodded, and I thought of a person in this tight family circle who maybe wasn’t amounting to *something*. My daddy’s version of *something*.

To be specific—Evelyn Sue. She was so starstruck with Hollywood, seemed she'd forgotten how to live right here in Lily. Vowed she wanted to take time off from her studies over at East Carolina College to decide on life. I guessed she wanted to find what to do with it. Life. I'm telling you, I might have been only fifteen, but I could tell something was in the wind with her. Ripe. That just named her state of mind perfectly. Ripe for trouble, as it turned out soon enough. I was surprised our parents didn't tune in on it. But then they were so busy criticizing her, they didn't actually take a moment to see her.

But Daddy did have a point. Randy Newsome had sure learned to use what he had to the best advantage. There old Harold Jones was, finishing up his five-minute speech. Smiling. Nodding at the applause.

Trudy nudged me when Randy walked to the lectern and we giggled because he was so short you could hardly see his head. Let's just make it easy here. Randy Newsome barely broke five foot three. He was the shortest boy in the senior class. Not bad looking but short.

Well, Randy got everybody's attention that morning when he suddenly turned around and walked back to where he'd been sitting. Now I was figuring he'd given up before he even got started, which, frankly, I would have done, being as speaking in front of five hundred people was not my favorite pastime.

But no. He stooped down and slid out from under his