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FICTION: The Perfect Family by Susan Bloch

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1.

Exhaust fumes billowed out the back of the removal van parked in my new neighbor's driveway. A girl of seven or eight years old hunkered next to the back wheel of the vehicle, sucking a few strands of her blonde curls. Her turquoise eyes darted left to right as she watched the movers, built like rugby players, rushing in and out of the London house. The minute she saw me, the girl, who I came to know as Holly, jumped up and ran to a slender woman I assumed was her mother. A charm anklet tinkled against the little girl's red patent leather shoes, and the skirt of her pink-and-white striped summer frock flew behind her.

Trying not to get in the way of two men lugging a four-seater white

sofa covered with plastic, I pressed my back against a yellow BMW coupe parked in the driveway. The path clear, I walked toward the front door balancing a tray with a plate of freshly baked butter cookies, a few glasses, and a jug of lemonade. My flip-flops slapped against the slate path.

“Welcome to Hampstead,” I said to the woman wearing Gucci jeans, a Burberry T-shirt, and a gold Rolex watch. Her upper arms were muscular and her petite body svelte. She probably spent a lot of time at the gym. I wished I’d zipped up my anorak to hide my blue-and-white housecoat.

“I hope you’ll be happy in your new home here. I’m Janet—I live in the house with the red tiled roof.”

“Hi, I’m Jasmine and this is Holly. Yes, I really wanted to move here. Good schools for my lovely girl—and the park nearby.”

I leaned forward and smiled at Holly. “The move must be such fun for you. I brought you some treats.”

The girl stared at me without blinking—the way kids do when they meet a stranger. Unable to resist the cookies, she reached out, took one, and flicked it into her mouth.

“How many times have I told you not to grab?” snapped Jasmine. The girl cringed and clutched her mom’s T-shirt. “And now you’re stretching my new top. Please, I’ve enough to do today without your nonsense.”

Stepping back, I straightened up and placed the tray on the porch a few feet away from the front door. “Let me know if you’d like me to keep an eye on Holly.”

“Oh, she’s fine here,” Jasmine said, glancing at her phone and waving her arms at one of the movers. “My husband, Tom, should be here soon—or so he said. Just like him to leave me to get on with things. He had to attend a board meeting at the bank this morning. A good excuse.”

Holly stared at me blinking rapidly and began gnawing her left thumbnail.

“My lovely daughter starts school tomorrow and she’ll settle into a routine. It’s only a few blocks away. Soon, she’ll be walking there all by herself, won’t you sweetheart?”

Holly wrapped her arms around her mother’s thighs, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Stop. You’re a big girl now,” Jasmine said, staring at her phone.

The girl ran to the porch, took another cookie, and licked the chocolate sprinkles as she rushed back to her mom.

When Jasmine started shouting at the movers about which box was to go where in the four-bedroom Edwardian house, I knew it was time to leave—but I couldn’t resist making another invitation.

“If you change your mind you’re welcome to bring Holly over,” I said.

No answer.

Recently divorced and with both sons away at university, I was happy to welcome a child—especially a girl—next door. We could bake muffins together, plait friendship bracelets, and do some of the girlie things my sons hadn’t wanted to do. A few times a week I played golf and bridge, but more often than not I sat slumped in front of the TV watching crime dramas and soap operas—*Desperate Housewives* as I ate dinner off a tray, then *Coronation Street* at 7p.m., followed by *Casualty*, and the nine o’clock news.

“I’ll pick these up later,” I said. “Just put the tray here on the porch.” Leaving Jasmine sipping on a thermos coffee mug and tottering around on silver high-heel sandals, I walked back down the driveway. Holly scuffled past me to crouch down again next to the truck’s wheel.

2.

The days grew shorter and greyer, and the leaves on the oak and sycamore trees turned yellow and brown, carpeting my lawn. Naked branches stood still like skeletons against gloomy clouds. Jasmine and I chatted over our common privet hedge when we raked leaves, pruned bare wisteria vines, and planted winter pansies and daffodil bulbs. A landscape gardener, she offered to help me re-design my flower beds for the following spring. Tom, Holly's dad, worked at an investment bank in the city. He was polite and friendly when we occasionally bumped into one another emptying the trash.

They seemed like the perfect family.

3.

Even though school was only a few blocks away, Tom often dropped Holly off on his way to the office. Peering through the Venetian blinds in my bedroom one morning, I saw Tom, in his pinstripe suit, opening the car door for Holly to climb into the back seat. As she stepped into the car, he leaned over and stroked her thigh . . . again, and then again.

"Do you think I should say something to someone?" I asked my neighbor Julie when we met for a drink that evening at our local pub.

"Don't be a nosey parker," she laughed, sipping the foam off her half pint of Guinness. "It's none of your business." She wiped her mouth with a paper serviette. "And anyway who'd believe you? Her dad's a big shot banker."

Staring into my glass, I took another sip of chardonnay but remained uneasy.

4.

One Sunday morning the following summer, I opened the front door to pick up the *Times* and found Holly sitting on the porch steps. She circled a yellow tennis ball, its fuzz worn smooth, round and round in her hands. I sat down next to her.

“Hi Holly, how are you?”

She bounced the ball on the steps a few times without answering.

“Do you like your new bedroom?”

She looked down at her feet, sniffled and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her hoodie. I sat still, quiet, and waited. But Holly didn’t speak. She stared at the ground for another minute then tossed the ball into my lap. That was the beginning for us, and we often sat together on those steps, not saying much, slinging the ball to one another, playing noughts and crosses, hangman, and snap.

When winter set in we graduated to sitting in the kitchen nook, where Holly wanted to do nothing more than munch cookies and draw in the sketch pad I bought her. At first, she pressed down too hard, breaking the tips of the graphite coloring pencils.

“I made this for you, Mrs. Jackson,” Holly said one Sunday. “It’s a bloodhound.”

A dog with a big jaw, floppy ears, a long tail, and large teeth filled the page. The animal was well proportioned with shading—highlights, shadows, and mid-tones under the chin and back legs. The image was frightening and as if to dramatize the animal’s expression, Holly opened her mouth and growled.

When I pinned it on my cork bulletin board, a broad smile highlighted her dimples. She ran to me and wrapped her arms around my waist pushing her face into my stomach.

5.

A few months before it happened, there was a light tap on my front door.

“Mrs. Jackson,” said Holly, “everyone in my house is still asleep. Can I play Monopoly with you?”

This was not unusual. Now ten, she often popped in to show me her latest artwork, complete a puzzle, or sit quietly reading a comic book. But this morning was different—she wouldn’t look me in the face. Her eyes were puffy and red, and she picked at the cuticles on her thumbs. Sitting at the kitchen table, she gulped down a glass of milk and swallowed a grilled cheese sandwich, barely chewing the crusts. Then she gobbled a handful of cookies I had baked especially for her.

“Holly, what’s going on? You look very sad today.”

No response. But she took the Monopoly set out of the drawer and beckoned to me.

During the game, Holly accidentally dropped the Monopoly money on the floor, cursed, and fumbled again as she picked up all the notes. She shook the dice for a long time before she threw them on the board, struggled to count the spaces as she moved her battleship token, banged her fist on the table when she landed on one of my properties, and only smiled briefly when I was sent to jail. Usually, she clapped her hands and giggled.

“Holly, what’s wrong?”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, Holly looked up at the ceiling and closed her eyes but didn’t answer. Then she dashed out the front door and ran home.

6.

That was the last time I saw Holly before sirens went off at midnight. Before medics carried out a black bag on a stretcher. Before Holly's mum was marched out of the house in a fleece nightgown down to her knees screeching, "Take your fucking handcuffs off me. I killed the bastard and I'd do it again. Fucking our daughter . . ." and before Holly, wearing a sweatshirt over her floral nightgown, was hustled into another police car. Her arms reached out for me. In her hands she clutched her mother's silver sandals.

"He told me he'd kill my mum if I said anything," Holly screamed.

"What will happen to that poor girl? Foster home?" my neighbor Julie said as we watched the police cars drive away. "You were right all along for suspecting that something was going on with her dad. Now I feel bad for calling you nosey. If I were her mum, I'd murder him too. Imagine finding the son-of-a-bitch on top of his own daughter."

"Lately, Holly popped around more, but when I asked her if everything was okay she clammed up." I pinched my forehead with my thumb and forefinger as if I were expecting a magic answer to my naivety. "She was always ravenous as if she hadn't eaten a proper meal for days. Now I know why she was always so hungry. How could she possibly eat at the same table as him?"

"And now we know why she was at your place so often," said Julie, putting her arm around my shoulder.

"The time I told you I saw Tom stroking her thigh . . . I wish I'd done something then."

I hugged Julie, ran into my house and slammed the door in my own face.

In the kitchen, I poured a large tot of scotch into a whiskey glass, threw my head back, and swallowed the drink in one gulp—choking and sputtering. Then I poured another, topped it with ice cubes, sat

at the kitchen table sipping and flipping through the drawings Holly had given me. On every page there was either an animal or plant flying away: An elephant with a long trunk leaning out of a plane flying over the ocean. A girl with long blonde hair carrying a bunch of yellow daisies walking away from a two-story house and down a dark brown path lined with tall Cyprus trees. Through her artwork Holly had tried to tell me that she needed to get away and I hadn't even noticed.

Not much of a drinker, my skin soon glowed with sweat from the alcohol. I tried to stand but lost my balance and sat down again. When the first rays of light filtered through the kitchen window, I woke slumped on the Formica table. A sharp pain sliced through my neck as I sat up, but I no longer felt dizzy. Walking over to the sink, I splashed cold water on my face, drenching my sweatshirt, but I didn't bother to take it off.

7.

After the "event," I tried to find Holly, but social services refused to divulge where she was staying, insisting it was not in her best interest for me to contact her.

"She needs to bond with her foster parents now. She's proving feisty and refusing to go to school."

"Okay, but please let me know when I might be able to take her out for lunch or a movie."

I called the social worker's office a few more times and got the same answer. After each conversation I sat at the kitchen table sipping a glass of wine often until the bottle was empty.

A few days before my own sons came home for the Christmas holidays, I looked in the mirror and didn't like what I saw—greasy hair; blue, creased sweater with toothpaste stains just below my neck; and dark, puffy bags under my eyes. I began to shower every

morning and wear freshly laundered, ironed jeans with a clean sweater; put on foundation, blush, eyeliner, and mascara; and wash my hair twice a week—making sure I used a flatiron to take out the frizz. I also stopped drinking alone. The boys and I dined on roasted ham and mashed potatoes, grilled Brussel sprouts with bacon, and Christmas pudding with brandy cream. Busy with loads of washing and ironing, it felt good to have a noisy, full house again. I'm ashamed to say I gave up my pursuit of Holly.

8.

All through the new year, yellow tape circled Holly's home. Police carried boxes and computers away. There were daily reports in the news about the family next door. "Awful goings-on in posh Hampstead," the tabloid *Sun* proclaimed. "Child abuse right in our midst," wrote the *Daily Mail*. During the trial, character sketches of Jasmine flashed on the nighttime news shows, along with family photos and a recent shot of Holly, taken by her father. Tarted up to look like a teenager, the ten-year-old was wearing thick makeup, a skimpy T-shirt, skinny jeans, a frown, and Jasmine's high-heeled silver sandals. Both the press and the defense made an impassioned plea for Jasmine to be released for rescuing her daughter. But the jury disagreed. She was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years in prison. Like the judge, I felt she'd been complicit, a silent bystander.

I had too.

9.

For weeks, I woke at 2, 3, and 4 a.m., and all I could see were Holly's chewed thumbs with swollen cuticles, the way she scuffed her sneakers on her way to and from school, and how she avoided my eyes—as if she expected me to know. From time to time, I flipped through Holly's drawings and each time read so much more into her

art. For a few minutes I stared at the one of a grey bird that looked like a hawk, flying across a field of small red flowers.

“They’re poppies,” she’d said. “We learned the poem about the fields of Flanders . . . ”

In its mouth the bird had a large black cross. Now it all made sense. She knew she couldn’t tell anyone what her dad was doing but she could draw it.

10.

I next saw Holly when I was staring at nothing through the window of the number 64 bus. She teetered on her mother’s sandals, the same three-inch silver stilettos Jasmine wore the day they moved in—on a street corner near the Harrow Tube Station. Now in her early teens, she wore a tight denim mini-skirt, snagged black tights, and a low-cut red T-shirt showing off her ample cleavage. Her upper arms were covered in tattoos, and pink highlights streaked her chopped shoulder-length hair. I banged on the doors of the bus, screaming that it was an emergency, but the driver refused to let me off. At the next stop when the doors swung open, I jumped off and raced back yelling “Holly! Holly!” I thought I saw her turn into the minimarket and ran in after her rushing up and down the aisles, but I’d been chasing the wrong girl.

Holly was gone.

11.

At fifteen Holly ran away from everyone.

It took BBC journalists to uncover the facts that social services had been reluctant to acknowledge. She’d left foster home after foster home, uncontained, undisciplined, unruly. For months apparently,

she'd been addicted to beer, vodka, coke, and life on the streets. The press attacked social services and her school principal for neglect of duty.

"I didn't know how to help Holly," one of her high school teachers said at a televised news conference. "She excelled in English and art and I hoped that would build her self-confidence. But she was so withdrawn—so locked up inside herself—it was so hard to have even a short conversation with her. Our school counselor tried to help, and we did contact social services, but they claimed to be doing all they could."

The teacher lowered her head, sniffed, paused for a few seconds, and continued. "During the lunch break Holly always sat alone in the cafeteria, although I asked her classmates to be nice to her. They said they didn't want to be friends with someone whose mum was a murderer. They all knew what had happened to Holly—it was as if sexual abuse was contagious. Once, I watched her trying to ignore the giggles from a group of girls at the next table. She sat sketching but not eating. I remember her staring at the greasy pizza on the plate and blotting the oil with paper toweling. As I walked toward her she jumped up and her chair fell over. She left it there lying on the floor, picked up her sketch pad, dumped her lunch in the bin, and walked away. She never came back."

We all failed Holly.

12.

"No, I've no clue where she is," I told the social worker when he showed up unexpectedly at my front door to find out if I'd had any contact with her. "See what you've done."

I didn't invite him inside.

"You knew she wanted to come and live with me after the murder, that I'd have been happy to foster her until her mother was released,"

I said all in one breath.

He stood there, staring at the doormat, holding on to his leather briefcase, and didn't answer. With folded arms I ranted on.

"You lot said I was too old to qualify and that it was best for Holly if we didn't meet. Living with me would've been better than all those other homes you shoved her into. But you wouldn't let her visit, or even go out for an icecream."

I wiped the spittle off my mouth.

He looked at me, took off his glasses, and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his tweed jacket. "I'm sorry. We thought we were doing what was best for her."

I turned around and slammed the front door.

13.

How was I to know that Holly was sleeping rough among discarded syringes, moldy pizza crusts, cardboard boxes, and fetid sleeping bags; that she was wrapped in the smell of urine, vodka, and funky bodies under the constant rumbling of Waterloo Bridge commuter trains; that she got paid to fuck and suck bankers in their pinstripe suits, red bracers, and Oxford brogues? Guys just like her dad. If I'd known, I would've gone to look for her there.

14.

Holly died before she was able to see the exhibition of her paintings at the Hampstead Town Hall and before Jasmine was released for good behaviour. Her foster parents and teachers were reluctant to identify her body, but I didn't refuse when the police called me to do so. She lay on a gurney in the central morgue wearing a mustard-

colored T-shirt with black stains and a pair of snagged black leggings. Her blonde curls were oily and matted, her mouth toothless, and there was a hole the size of a shirt button in her nostril where someone must've pulled out the stud. Rigor mortis had set in, and her hands were clenched into tight fists. Sores blotched her cheeks and hid her dimples, and the blisters on her lips oozed pus.

In an adjoining room, her belongings lay in a plastic bag on a table—a tube of magenta lipstick, a comb with a broken handle, a dog-eared paperback of *The Secret Garden* I'd given her on her ninth birthday, an exercise book filled with sketches of her life under the arches amongst trash cans and beer bottles, a library card, a toothbrush with grey bristles, a tube of toothpaste rolled up to the end, two sharpened pencils, and a couple of hair ties. When I saw the scuffed silver sandals, I collapsed against the wall, coughing.

Guilty as charged.



Susan Bloch



Susan Bloch is an eclectic freelance writer and avid globe trotter. Her

fiction and nonfiction writing explore a range of topics from the Mumbai Massacre to hiking the Skeleton Coast in Namibia, navigating the loss of a spouse, and advocating for gender equity in leadership.

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