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A Perfectly
Good Family

Lionel Shriver

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LIONEL SHRIVER

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TO DON AND PEGGY SHRIVER

*from whom, on balance, I have inherited more strengths
than foibles—the most parents could hope for any child*

A son could bear complacently the death of his father, while
the loss of his inheritance might drive him to despair.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

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1

'Don't tell me,' said the taxi driver, rubber-necking at the formidable Victorian manor. 'Your mother's Norman Bates.'

'My mother's dead,' I said. Harsh, but the information was so fresh for me, only two weeks old, that I was still repeating it to myself.

'Don't you strain yourself, Missy.' He lunged from the front seat to take the luggage from me: two leather monsters and a bulging carry-on. I'd been overweight at Heathrow, and lucky that in November the plane was not too full.

'You want, I'll haul these to the porch—'

'Not at all,' I said. 'My brother likes to give me a hand. He always has.'

I pulled out a wad of dollars crumpled with fivers, unsure of the form for tipping taxis in North Carolina. An ostensible native, I clung to any ignorance about Raleigh as proof that I no longer belonged here. Skint most of my adult life, I reminded myself I would have more money soon and forced myself to hand over twenty per cent. The generosity didn't come naturally. McCreas are Scots-Presbyterian stock; I have stingy genes.

'But you're spot on about the house,' I nodded upwards. 'It does look like *Psycho*, all right. The neighbourhood children all think it's haunted.'

And wasn't it? Handing over the bills, I thumbed Alexander Hamilton; after five years of starchy London tenners, a dollar felt like pyjamas.

'Or *The Addams Family*, mehbe. Take care now, ma'am. Hope your brother's a muscly guy. Those cases is killers.'

'He's pretty powerful.' I frowned. Since I still envisaged Truman as a delicate, timid tag-along about two feet high, that

he was a beefy man of thirty-one who lifted weights in his attic living room was disconcerting.

The cab ploughed down Blount Street, leaving me by chattel that would have been, until a fortnight before, all I owned. I turned to face what else I owned: a great, gaunt mansion built just after the Civil War.

There was no denying its magnificence. I had shown friends in London pictures of my family: my dark, glamorously beautiful mother in the days when she was genuinely happy instead of pretending to be; my father sporting his lopsided, hangdog grin as he accepted another award from the NAACP; my little brother Truman when he was photographed by the *Raleigh Times* throwing himself in front of a bulldozer; though I had no pictures, I discovered, of my older brother. None of these snaps made the slightest impression. Yet when I showed them a picture of my house, faces lit, hands clapped, eyebrows lifted. For the English, Heck-Andrews was everything a Southern residence was meant to be: remote, anachronistic, both inviting and forbidding at the same time. It fulfilled their tritest expectations, though I received complaints that there was no Spanish moss. That's in South Carolina, I'd explain. And then we would get on to why I didn't seem to have a Southern accent, and I'd be reassured that tell-tale traces had been eradicated.

Even in the last light of the day I could see the clapboard was flaking; so the failing manila paint was now my problem. It was apparent from the pavement that the ceilings of the first two floors were vaulting, all very exhilarating except they were murderously dear to heat, and the price of oil was now, I supposed, my problem as well. Yet paint and heat were only a third my responsibility—and this in itself would shortly become my biggest problem.

It was the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, a holiday which I only ever remembered in Raleigh-Durham, where gift shops were flogging pop-up pilgrim books; letting this exclusively American holiday nearly slip by unnoticed gave me a sense of accomplishment. I zipped up my jacket. No doubt the English didn't picture the South in winter, but North Carolina has one, albeit mild. In fact, I remembered dressing for school huddled by the floor vent, stuffing my bunched knee-highs by its breath to pre-warm my socks. My parents were McCreas, too, and their

remedy to the heating problem was all too simple.

I left the bags on the pavement and strode towards the broad, intricately ornamented front porch that skirted the mansion. This opulent, gregarious-looking expanse with a swing on one end was designed for mint juleps; but my parents had been teeto-tallers and, rather than recall long languid summer nights with fireflies and low laughter, I pictured squeaking morosely with Truman on the swing, frantic for my parents to go to bed. We hadn't been very nice to them. Ordinarily on one of my visits home as I approached this same front door I'd be bracing myself for my mother's protracted, claim-laying embrace—when the more I stiffened, the harder she would squeeze. Once my father died, her hugs had become only longer and tighter and were laced with hysteria. Now I was spared. A dubious reprieve.

We rarely entered through the front door, more comfortable with the side entrance into the kitchen. Ringing the bell, I touched the cold curlicued polygonal panes in the door, one of which had been replaced with plain window glass. The asymmetry never failed to vex Truman. But because the original had been shattered when my older brother put his arm through it—my father had been chasing him through the house to force him to turn down the volume of *Three Dog Night*—I treasured the flaw. There weren't many signs of Mordecai left here.

'Corlis!'

In the open door my brother hugged me. He knew how: his hands were firm on my back and he waited a single beat during which he was plausibly thinking about being glad to see me and then he let go. I didn't take these capacities for granted.

'You should have let us pick you up.'

'Not during rush hour.' The consideration was unlike me. When I gestured to my luggage on the pavement, I thought I was doing Truman a favour by allowing him to heave it in.

'What have you got in these things, a dead body?'

'You might say that.'

'I thought you were only here for a few days.' He muttered, 'Girls!' with a smile.

I watched my little brother. He was broad, though to say stocky would suggest fat, which he was not. He liked carrying suitcases because he was a practical person and enjoyed putting his muscles to more beneficial use than for sandbagged press-ups. His

face, too, was wide, though in my mind's eye it remained insubstantial. Likewise, his hair had coarsened and curled; though we were both born blondes, our driving licences now would read, 'Hair: brown.' Yet I refused to relinquish the notion that my brother's mop was bright gold, a cowlick sprouting from his parting with the spontaneous whimsy of Truman's childhood, of which there was, in fact, little remnant.

My vision was so corrupted that if I blinked, he no longer sported a close-cropped beard. They don't make corrective lenses for people unable to focus on the present tense, so that this myopia of mine would soon have me banging into things all over our house which were there now and not in the past—like my brother's hair-trigger temper. While Truman McCrea as an adult was depressive and given to bilious explosions, I would continue to treat him carelessly, as if he remained the ingenuous, piping, cooperative boy who would do whatever I told him with unfailing trustfulness. He was still, God help him, trusting.

I nudged the cases past the transom and clumped the door shut, rubbing my hands. With Truman controlling the thermostat it was warm in the foyer. Inside Heck-Andrews, with its seasoned oak floor and mahogany panelling absorbing the late sun, evening had arrived. The lamps were lit and for a moment I was taken in: that this was the enclosed, safe, self-contained haven that other people called home. Leering back at me from the facing staircase were the gargoyles on whose pointed ears I'd impaled my crotch as a girl when sliding down the black walnut banisters. It was amazing I could still have children—though not for many years longer.

'Hey, there,' said Averil shyly, hanging back.

I kissed my sister-in-law diffidently, on both cheeks, and stood back to appraise her. There was no reason why Averil should not have been pretty. Her hair was brown as well, but lustrous, while our own was embittered by the memory of its former golden glory and ate the light. She cut hers shoulder length and the locks coiled, turning to her ears as if also shy. She was medium height, though maybe that was the trouble: too much of her was simply medium. Nourished by my brother's obsessively perfect diet, her figure was trim, though her sway-backed posture was pre-pubescent. Her nose was upturned, expectant, and her eyes were enormous with bashful long lashes, and when they turned to my

brother they widened still further, colouring with big brown awe. She adored him. Averil, too, was far older than I pictured her—twenty-eight. I thought: she is nicely proportioned and really ought to be lovely, though I did not think: maybe she is lovely.

I nodded at the stand in the hall. 'It's still there.'

'Yep,' said Truman, pressing his lips like my mother.

Mother's pocketbook always rested on this doorside table, where it continued to rest, clasped, reposed like a body in a casket. I knew what was inside: a tin of Sucrets gone sticky, the medicine she didn't take for her heart, and a vast crumple of multiply re-used Kleenex pressed with pink lipstick. When we sniffled in church, she would hand us a damp tatter; repelled, we'd snort the mucus down our throats.

'You should cancel the credit cards,' I advised.

I delivered duties to my brother as privileges. For the funeral ten days earlier, I had allowed him to buy the cold cuts and to ring her colleagues at the hospice. This was the kind of graciousness in which I specialized.

We drifted to the formal parlour, though traditionally we'd have preferred the sitting room opposite, a less pompous environment with the TV and torn naugahide sofas that was comfortably messy. Some solemnity had entered these proceedings which I didn't know how to kick. I felt polite.

'My whole life,' said Truman, in his minor key, 'I've been taught not to go into Mother's purse without asking. Pawing through her wallet doesn't come easily.'

Truman fetched us glasses of wine, and I scanned the parlour, no longer milling with Raleigh's community leaders, hands on my shoulder assuring me what a *good* woman my mother had been, how *deeply committed* my father had been to civil rights, and all the while me squirming at their touch, not feeling flattered even on my parents' account and hoping that when I died no one called me 'good'—though considering what I had just left behind me in London, there was little danger of that.

'I don't know what we're going to do with all this junk,' said Averil.

At least she was candid. However laborious the task of cluttering such vast floor space, my parents had undertaken the chore with some success. With no less than twenty-four rooms in this house, it was substantially over-furnished. The parlour, for example, was fat

with low-riding Danish modern. If Truman is to be believed, my parents did not understand (I would say, did not even like) their own house, and were always fighting its retrograde nature and trying to haul it wholesale into the twentieth century, where, according to Truman, Heck-Andrews not only did not belong but refused to go. Thus none of their 'improvements' would take—when my father repapered the upstairs hall with purple peonies, the panels curled to the baseboards that same night. When they splurged on shag for the sitting room, none of the carpet tacks would stay in the floor. I claimed their additions didn't adhere because my father was a do-it-yourself incompetent—his glue was too thin and he used the wrong nails. Truman, one of the last great anthropomorphizers, was convinced that the house itself had revolted, moulting loud wallpaper and shuddering tatty shag from her boards.

As for the 'junk' of which Averil despaired, my parents had been avid travellers, favouring countries with anguishing social ailments: South Africa, Burma, Korea, where they would meet with pastors just out of prison, dissidents running underground presses, and Amnesty International task forces. Somewhere in all that hand-wringing over human rights they'd found time to shop, for this room was busy with been-to bric-a-brac: Namibian carvings, Korean celadon, hand-painted Russian dolls, while the walls were smattered with a mismatch of Japanese sumi birdlife, Indonesian batiks and Masai ceremonial masks.

'I suppose we can help ourselves,' I said. 'Like a boot sale at the end of the day, and everything's free.'

'I wish they'd taken this stuff with them,' said Truman glumly.

'The house, too?' I proposed. 'Like *Carrie*.'

He glared. 'How was the opening? Of your show?'

I sculpt. I had flown back to Heathrow after my mother's funeral to attend my first big break, a one-woman show at a decent London gallery. My mother had been so pleased for me when she heard about it that I didn't think she'd want me to miss my limelight to moon around this house deciding who got her crockery. Truman had been annoyed by my departure, but no life outside this house was real to him; other cities—Raleigh itself, come to think of it—were names in the air. And I'd done as I promised: I'd come back to haggle over our inheritance.

'It was smashing,' I said.

Coy, but with catastrophes you have to salvage something, if only the odd wisecrack.

My wine had evaporated; I was nervous. I *pinged* for more, to discover there wasn't much difference between drinking around my mother and drinking around my younger brother. They both eyed your glass and kept a running count. I often wondered what it was Mother thought I might do or say when I became so fearfully uninhibited. Once she'd become sufficiently alarmed—after two glasses—my bottle would get whisked off and corked, so to slake my thirst I would have to scrounge for my good cabernet hidden *gauchely* in the back of the fridge. This was subtle strategy. Once we were adults, she couldn't forbid booze exactly, but she made you go public with how you couldn't make it through an ordinary evening with your family without drink. She was right. I couldn't.

I leaned forward and traced the ceramic basketry of a bulbous celadon vase on the coffee table. I worked with clay myself, and had to admire the craftsmanship of its intricate crosshatching, though the aura of the object was cool. If the serene sea-green vase had any thematic content, it was self-congratulation: wasn't-this-difficult-to-make. It was a gift from a grateful Korean graduate student with wayward political views, whom my father had smuggled into NC State out of Seoul. My parents had been so proud of this thing and it meant nothing to me and now it was mine.

Like my father, Truman couldn't keep his hands still, but sprang them against each other or twisted his wedding band and then kneaded the back of his neck as if trying to give himself a massage.

He nodded at the tomes to my left, each volume five inches thick. 'I don't think we should let Mordecai have the *Britannicas*.'

Matt black with gold inlay, the *Britannicas'* aura resembled that of the vase, though where the celadon was smug the encyclopedias were scholarly, old-school, elitist. Written before HIV and even the Second World War, they were pure, withdrawn; they dwelt on antiquity, and it was hard to imagine they chronicled anything sordid. The volumes were redolent of my father, with his imposing memory for dates and the first names of historical figures. As the only girl, I was raised to think of myself as not very bright: the *Britannicas* were smarter than I was; they shut me out.

'A 1921 reference book?' I shrugged. 'Try looking up "microchip".'
'That first edition is valuable.'

'The stereo is valuable,' I said. 'So's that vase.' *So's the house.* It was marvellous, what people in my family left out.

Truman tapped the black spines. 'Every time Mordecai deigned to come back home—to ask for another "loan"—he'd drool over these books and talk about how he could hardly wait to inherit the set. To their faces. While they were alive and not very old and in good health! That call you got from me two weeks ago, you knew you'd get it some day, but I'm sure you were dreading it. Mordecai had been drumming his fingers by the phone. When I called him the day she died, I was sure the first thing that went through his mind was, *goodie*, now I get the Britannicas. For that matter, remember the Living Will?'

'Who could forget?' I groaned.

'Not Mother, that's for sure. Mother remembered it, all right. Often.'

This is not the kindest introduction to my older brother. Seven years earlier, in 1985, we had gathered in this parlour at my parents' request. I'd flown down from New York City where I was living at the time, though summoning Mordecai from only a mile away was the greater achievement. He'd only agreed to come when he heard their family conference had something to do with money.

My parents had arranged themselves on the couch, not wanting to begin without Mordecai, who had learned from my father that important people keep others waiting. Once my older brother galumphed in the door an hour late, with a curious glance around the mansion as if he'd never been here before, we three children faced the couch and fidgeted; all that was on offer was black coffee.

My mother took photocopies out of a file folder and passed them around like a handout in school. She presided. In bold on the top of my copy read: A LIVING WILL. My mother proceeded to explain that as medical advances these days often make it possible for comatose or vegetative patients to live for years on life support, it was increasingly common for adults of sound mind to record in writing what their wishes might be in circumstances where they were no longer competent.

'Father and I—' she never called him Sturges to us, only Father. '—wanted you children to know that we've signed these pledges, verifying that we don't want any heroic measures—'

'You mean, expensive measures,' Mordecai had interrupted.

'Yes,' Mother agreed evenly, 'hospital costs for PVS patients can be quite high—'

'A thousand bucks a day,' Mordecai provided. 'And that's before the twenty-dollar aspirins.'

Mother may have coloured slightly, but she kept her composure.

'These forms are not binding contracts in court,' chimed in my father, the lawyer. 'But they are admissible evidence, and doctors have increasingly used them consultatively when a family needs to make a decision. Euthanasia *per se* is not legal in the United States, but there have been precedents—'

The photocopy was sticking to my fingers. My mother crafted an emotion in front of herself, much the way I worked up a sculpture—patting here, smoothing the rough edges, and only presenting it when fashioned to her satisfaction. My experience of real feelings, however, is that they do not take shape on a turntable in view, but loom from behind, brutal and square and heavily dangerous like a bag of un-wedged clay hurtled at the back of your neck. Feelings for me are less like sculpture and more like being mugged. Consequently, with no warning, I burst into tears.

'Corrie Lou, whatever's the matter?'

I snuffled, 'I don't want to think about your dying,' not sounding anywhere near twenty-eight years old.

My father was probably embarrassed, maybe even touched, but his expression was one of irritation.

Mother came over and stroked my hair, as she had when, roughhousing with my brothers, I'd skinned my knee—tender and purring, she was not really worried. She surprised me. Histrionic of the family, my mother should have, I thought, thrown both arms around me and wept as well, hearing those unheralded phone rings in my South Ealing flat years hence. But she was matter-of-fact. That was when I realized that most people do not fear their own deaths, really. Yours is the one death you are guaranteed not to live through; you will never have to suffer the world without you in it. She was in terror, I knew, of anything happening to my father, but as for the prospect of something

happening to her beforehand she was positively hopeful.

Mother scuttled to the foyer and retrieved one of those recycled Kleenex. Once I'd blown my nose in the shreds, I swabbed drips from their Living Will, smearing the print with pink lipstick. Meanwhile my father was explaining that your mother and I don't consider life worth living if our minds are gone, and we would hate for your lasting memory of us to be as the parents who couldn't remember your names.

Meanwhile, Truman sat mutely in his chair and folded his Living Will in thirds. That he, too, did not get weepy was no testimony to lack of affection for his parents; if anything, Truman's attachment to his forebears was of the three of us the most profound—too profound, in my view. He merely lacked imagination. Like foreign cities, the future was abstract; Mr Practicality would not mourn an event that hadn't occurred yet.

Mordecai, however, couldn't keep seated. He was buoyant. 'This is a bang-up idea.' He fanned the photocopy, his three pigtailed wagging across his leather vest. 'Christ, we wouldn't want what happened to Grandmother to happen to you guys. She just lay there for years, it must have cost a fortune! And insurance doesn't always cover it, you know. Exceed the liability, that's it, you sell the house, liquidate assets, a whole life's savings down the IV tube.'

At the mention of 'sell the house', Truman's eyes had shot black.

'You know,' Mordecai went on, 'sometimes photocopied signatures don't hold up in court. You want to re-sign my copy? I'll keep the form in my deposit box. Wouldn't want it to get misplaced, right?'

Allowing one corner of his mouth a spasm of incredulity, my father scrawled on Mordecai's copy *Sturges Harcourt McCrea*, disdainfully illegible; my mother penned her neat initials, *EHHM*, wincing.

She bent to refill our coffee cups from the thermos and offered me another biscuit; my father scowled over *The Christian Century*—anything to avoid glancing at their eldest son. Before Mordecai lunged ebulliently to the door, one more time he sauntered to the Britannicas and caressed them, intoning, 'The new edition is nowhere near as comprehensive.'

'You got the feeling,' Truman recalled, 'that Mordecai would