

Perfect Strangers

by [Lucius Falkland](#) (November 2023)



La Couseuse à la robe rouge, Jeanne, Henri Manguin, 1907

A Second Draft

Is this the way that they're supposed to be?
Would any writer add this to the plot?
I'm my wife in our relationship, you're me.
I calmly make another cup of tea,
Clear up the broken china and debris
And hold you as you sip. There's been a lot
Of scolding, burning; shattered cups and pots.

The average paramour, I'm fairly sure,
Is not supposed to make you understand
Why your wife could sometimes see you as a chore,
Resent the way that she has to inure
Herself against the breakage; be the bore:
The stable one—the calm, unshaking hand
That pours the tea—like the safety of the land.

But that is why she's now a kind of friend
Who rowed me through my sea; the squalls, the gale.
With you, it's so hard to comprehend,
The intimacy when you apprehend
Life in the same way: You must append
To your story a plot twist that would tend
To the absurd, in spite of how things might all end.
You've no choice but redraft your whole tale.

Beyond Frightened

I was led to a beige car to meet you,
Perhaps a 1980s Ford Cortina.
In the front seat, next to the driver,
You huddled, beyond frightened,
As if held hostage, even though
All you needed to do was unclick the belt
And open the passenger door.

I was beckoned to the back, the seat behind yours.
In the foot well, behind the driver,
A ragged child, maybe 8, was giggling at me:
Dark hair, olive skin, Iberian;
Nothing like you or me.
I thought of a drawing of a boy
I'd seen at the Dali Museum in Figueres.
Suddenly, we both got out.
We kissed,

But you couldn't talk to me.
You whispered.

I woke up.
I remembered that word
You'd used again and again.
"Do you ever think how surreal this is?
Booking a secret weekend in Kings Lynn?
A town we've no connection to."

Life metamorphosing:
The rational, the predictable turning to rust
Like a clapped out Ford Cortina
Which you've tried so hard to keep going;
It's breakdown beyond frightening,
But, somehow, the opposite of a nightmare.

She Who Would Valiant Be

You had lost control not very long before
Like a geyser in the basalt, all burst through.
I was calm and firm; igneous rock; iron ore,
But the following day, I found that I was you.
As I quaked at every seismic truck or van,
Your voice went all faux-child-like with glee:
"Now prepare to turn! Get ready! Come on! Yes, you can!"
Unnerved by driving there, you dealt with me.

A super-empathetic trendy teacher?
Was this Montessori method new to you?
That day autistic breakdown didn't feature.
You somehow knew exactly what to do.
From putting on a comic northern accent
To cheering every single time I turned.
Now, those Cheshire winding lanes were not the torment

That could've left me cut and scarred and burned.

Heart racing, senses overwhelmed, malfunction:
Like a cyborg accidentally splashed with beer.
You'd undergone a kind of holy unction.
It was *your* role, now, to soothe *my* sense of fear.
You calmed me, you inspired me, your devotion,
Like some goddess they once worshipped outside Crewe:
"Have faith in me, when I'm battling strong emotion,
Because one day you will want my faith in you."

Perfect Strangers

Is it having children or just maturity
That lets you feel what they did?
Shouting, ashamed, at your autistic clumsiness;
Growling to "pick your feet up" in a Caterham crowd,
As you find yourself, again, thrust earthward.

Despite every thwarted fun, every threat, chide, smack or yell,
At some point, you enter your parents' black-and-white TV world,
Understand them; are happy because they're happy,
And not just because the painting you've brought home from school's evoked it.

But what if they have a "passionate affair"?
If they find "true love" at last; their One,
Which you knew was never your Mum?
If they're dancing for another person in the garden
When you thought the comic act was all for you?
If they betray your mother
For a more similar pair of eyes, secluded in the sycamores?
You see it all, but don't realise.

Can you feel joy, then, for their elation?

Raymond, of the Hillingdon Contingent, could.

"It's great. I love it. My father's secret life.

"Such a severe old stick, to find he had such passion.

"Makes it so much easier to cope with,

"I can start judging *him* for a change!"

Not as a father, but as a ceramic-brittle human.

I broke down at that scene; you knew I would,

As I thought, "Could my son ever feel joy

"About 'the only person that brings out the joy in me'?

"About *my* 'passionate affair'?

"About what, at least for now, is hidden in the trees?"

Perfect Strangers wrenched me earthward

As suddenly as a fall aged 9.

"What is it about Raymond?" I wondered,

"That's not true of your dad or my grandfather?"

If my son can know how much I love him,

And wish him only the kind of resonance-rapture I found at 40,

Perhaps one day he'll smile about this too,

As he enters my pre-internet world.

The Last Battle

It's become too much for you,

Again, as it often seems to:

The struggle with lonely Oxford, banal,

Relationship so un-poetic, tad dull,

Like mine, though into which contacts and friends,

To you, appear weaved and dyed in the wool.

Paranoid: the whole Bayeaux Tapestry unravelling,

No matter how carefully one Saxon's unstitched.

Traditions enjoyed that might fray, become pinched,

Like the best friend, now mother, no longer with time
For the rituals that let battle once feel anodyne.
When you stare to the future, across the channel, and the tide
Might not carry you to the precise little islet espied
But to another coast; unexpected; your heart quickens.

When that happens, just in your thoughts,
And I watch you, as I did in that King's Lynn hotel,
Try, try so hard, to keep control, but fail,
It does to me something I hardly dare write.
Hermaphroditic other half I may be,
But nineteen years older, pre-frontal lobes tight,
It brings out the father in me.

You asked me, later, in bed, how it feels
To be the one of us two so much more mature
And when I watch it become, once again,
Just too much for you to endure,
I feel, like Duke William, alive in the threads,
That I must take charge, because somebody must,
And no-one else, it seems, will.

When it all becomes just too much,
I'll feign a retreat and then turn
And put to flight those pagan footmen
As they chase you down Senlac Hill.

[Table of Contents](#)

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