

Perfect

by Marcy Dermansky

On weekends, Suzanne Eldred, a violinist at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, gave private lessons. Upstairs, in the apartment directly above, I covered my face with my hands. After three hours and three lessons, I went down to complain. Suzanne wouldn't let me in. She spoke to me through the tiny space between door and jamb, the chain lock still in place.

"Please get away from my door," she said. "I'm working." Suzanne looked at my feet. I wasn't wearing shoes. She shook her head back and forth before closing the door in my face.

Suzanne often practiced for hours and hours while I sat upstairs, feeling hateful. Compulsively braiding my hair. Telling myself I had value.

I was supposed to be smart, talented. My mother said I had a quick mind. But I had this full time job at a seedy Facilities Management Office. For a while, I'd dated a plumber. When we talked about movies I got the feeling he was smarter than I was and I had to break up with him. I was staring at my bare feet when I overheard Suzanne apologizing for my intrusion. "My neighbor, Miss Ruppi," she said, "is not stable."

I picked up Suzanne's welcome mat and took it with me.

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My mother called, exhausted from the dog's latest vet emergency. Rosie was an apricot standard poodle, twelve years old and not aging well. She'd eaten rat poison. The vet pumped her stomach and kept her overnight.

"You don't sound good," my mother said.

"Suzanne started practicing at two this morning. Scales. Exercises. Beethoven."

"Live Beethoven. How wonderful."

"No, Mom," I said. "No."

"So talk to her," she said. "You've got to learn to handle noise. You can't use it as an excuse. The world is getting louder."

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After the welcome mat episode, Suzanne took a break and I had a good week. When I came home from work, I ate peanut butter cookies, dipping them in hot coffee; I sat on the couch, reading, able to read. And when I went to bed, I got under the covers and fell directly to sleep. This was bliss. Attractive, normal people sat down next to me on the bus and talked to me about normal things like the new palm trees on Market Street and mayor Willie Brown's newest \$200 hat. A beautiful Asian woman complimented me on the silk shirt I was wearing.

I wondered if Suzanne had gone out of town. I decided I would water her plants. She'd given me a key for that purpose.

There was a handsome police officer in her apartment. He sat on Suzanne's couch, holding her violin with his chin as if he were about to play.

"Hello," he said, uncocking the instrument. He had that suddenly popular gap between his front teeth. I figured Suzanne would have a gorgeous boyfriend, this cop. He would tell her I'd broken in.

"I was going to water the plants," I said, nodding my head. "I thought she was out of town."

"Suzanne's dead," he said softly. "Didn't you know?"

"Dead?"

"Hit and run. Monday."

I looked at the police officer. He appeared to be genuinely sad, nervous, waiting for my reaction. His gentle voice belonged to a librarian or a high school teacher. My right leg began to shake. I could hear the heel of my shoe tapping against Suzanne's wood floor.

The police officer walked toward me. His gun gleamed in his belt and I could hear my foot. Tapping. Without saying another word, this beautiful man hugged me. His uniform was warm and scratchy. I hadn't been held since my plumber, more than a year ago. I leaned in. The police officer ran his hands through my clean hair. The hard, plastic buttons of his uniform pressed into my cheek. I forgot why I had come.

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The affairs of the dead require attention to detail. Suzanne had no family. That's why the police officer, Swallow, was in her apartment

searching through her belongings. I volunteered to plan the funeral.

Suzanne's parents had died years earlier in a plane accident. The airline had provided Suzanne a generous settlement. I decided to have her cremated. I spent two thousand dollars on a small marble urn with solid gold trim for her ashes, and then another thousand on flowers. Purple irises and pink tulips and bright yellow daffodils. I bought a wonderful African violet with purple flowers to go behind the urn.

I wrote the obituary. The writing was good, and Judy, the woman from the Conservatory's public relations department, congratulated me. She gave me her card.

The Asian women on the bus now commented on my smile.

"What did you do?" she said. "Win the lottery?"

"No," I said. "Nothing."

But I felt richer. I was hoping to get a better job. My hair fell into loose, shining waves. I slept through the night. I couldn't tell anyone the truth. Suzanne was dead. My life was just beginning. I was glad, jubilant to be alive.

I spent an evening with Swallow sorting through her closets. We assembled a three foot high pile of white blouses, two feet worth of long black skirts. We giggled. We kissed for the first time, shyly, giggled some more.

"I've never liked the violin," Swallow said. "My mother used to drag me to classical music concerts when I was little. I made spit balls out of the program."

"My mother loses patience when I get sad," I said. "She tells me

about the dog."

Swallow shrugged, smoothing the top of a gauzy white blouse on the top of the pile. I kissed him again.

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My mother wanted to fly out for Suzanne's funeral. I didn't want her come. She would try to explain away my happiness.

"I don't want you all alone," she said.

"I have Officer Swallow with me."

My mother groaned. "You can't trust police officers, Baby," she said. "They carry guns."

In the background, I heard Rosie barking, the front door slam, and my father, announcing in his booming voice, "Honey, I'm home."

It was about time for dinner. My mother complained about the phenomena of dinner. Every day, rain or shine.

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She brought Rosie. Five thousand miles. My mother had given her a tranquilizer in the taxi and the dog was knocked out when they

reached the building. The cab driver helped us carry her upstairs.

My mother fed the dog water through an eye dropper.

"I couldn't bear to leave my sweet girl," she said. She sat at the edge of my bed, her left hand closed up into a fist. "I don't trust your father. The way he complains about the vet bills."

I walked to the supermarket and bought a five pound package of ground beef, rice, a bottle of Absolut, cranberry juice, and grapefruit juice. My mother fixed our drinks as I prepared Rosie's dinner, a mixture of browned meat and rice. We drank Sea Breezes, waiting for the dog to wake up. After our third drink, my mother took my hand and led me into the bathroom. We sat on the tub's edge.

"Is that Suzanne's?" she asked.

The green lettering on Suzanne's welcome mat matched my towels. "How did you know?"

"I didn't raise a daughter who buys a welcome mat."

My mother put her arms around me and I leaned my head against her shoulder. I thought of the times we went to the supermarket together, stealing handfuls of cashews and toffee-covered peanuts from bulk food bins.

"It's so good to be here," my mother said, kissing the top of my head. "We might stay awhile."

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Suzanne's violin section showed up for the funeral. Judy, the PR rep, brought along a Chinese girl, a child prodigy, Suzanne's replacement, adorable in a pink cotton dress. My boss and my three favorite Latino custodians surprised me by showing up. Swallow came, wearing a suit. It was the first time I had seen him out of uniform and he looked wonderful.

My mother cried. I was glad she was there. She made the funeral seem real. The female reverend also looked wonderful. Her hair was long and gray. She had dressed in black slacks and a turtleneck sweater. Her speech was short, tasteful. I'd also arranged for a quartet from the Conservatory to perform. They played something by Bach. My mother moved her head to the music, closing her eyes. Swallow linked his fingers through mine.

Suddenly, I could see my future.

My mother doesn't leave. She moves into Suzanne's empty apartment. We wake early, drink fresh squeezed orange juice and eat toasted English muffins with raspberry jam. We find Rosie a fabulous new vet and every morning we take her for walks along the beach. I throw tennis balls and she chases them down in the surf.

I can see it as clearly as if I am watching a movie. We are all so happy. Me and my mother and Swallow and Rosie. Even my father. He comes out for holidays and takes us out to expensive restaurants. On clear nights, Swallow takes me for drives in his shining police car, the blue light whipping round, casting beams of promise onto the sidewalks.

