

PERFECT STRANGERS

By

ELLIE

This is my first year of high school. My only sibling has been in this school for the last three years and from what I have read on the bathroom walls, he has established quite a reputation for himself.

Keith Forbes is hot!

Diane B. And Keith F.

Keith F. is a s.o.b.

Sue G. loves #19

For a good time, call

I scratched out the phone number provided since it is my phone number too, and I feel self-conscious seeing it there on the wall --- as if we are running a business from our home. However, this explains why sometimes I answer the telephone and I hear giggling at the other end before the line goes dead. I am tempted to replace the number with my brother's cell number. I decide against this, wanting to believe that whoever wrote this found our home number online, and that Keith did not actually provide it.

My brother is undeniably good-looking. His thick nut brown hair is streaked with natural golden highlights that no hairdresser could ever reproduce. His skin has always been blemish-free which is totally unfair given my acne problems. He has our father's olive skin while I have my mother's fair complexion which, with my straight black hair, makes me look vampire-like.

I would tell my mother about my discomfort at learning of my brother's exploits, but she has gone to live with Jason. Jason calls my mother Honey, something I never heard my father call her. I do not think my father is big on nicknames; he always uses my full name (Christine) when he addresses me. He called my mother Audrey, and she called him Mitch until the name Jason started being mentioned in our house, and then she began to call my father Mitchell.

My brother seems unperturbed by my arrival at his school. My best friend's brother is embarrassed by her presence and does not acknowledge her except by an indifferent nod as he passes us in the hall. Keith, on the other hand, goes out of his way, even extricating himself from his peer group of jocks and cheerleaders to talk to me.

"Hey Chrissy how's it going?" or "Good morning sis." Or today's greeting: "Hey, I recognize you. Weren't you sitting across the table from me at breakfast?"

His friends chuckle as if he has said something clever. My girlfriend titters. I am embarrassed for Denise. I live with Keith and I know that he is not so special. He is the jerk who leaves the lids on the condiment jars loose so that when I pick up the relish or the mustard, the jar drops to the floor while the lid remains in my hand. He is the melon-head who forgets to refill the toilet paper and leaves the toilet seat up so that in the middle of the night I suffer a shock when my butt lands on the cold porcelain. He is the conceited oaf who uses my shampoo and my hair conditioner and spends hours primping in front of the bathroom mirror. The shouting matches that result when I need the washroom after he has been in there *forever* can be heard by our next-door neighbours. When my father suggests I use the smaller, drearier washroom on the main floor, I am so irked that I stomp down the stairs heavily causing the recently- vacuumed runner to poof dustless air.t

My brother plays on our junior hockey team. Our small city has few homegrown luminaries, and the Cougars' present high ranking in the league has made the players local celebrities. But Keith's success as a hockey player is not his own. It meant that my father spent almost all his spare time at hockey arenas, and that my mother turned to Jason for the affection she lacked. I am not excusing her, or blaming my brother for my parents' break up, and I suppose I'm glad my father insisted his children remain with him, meaning I don't have to live with Jason, but I sometimes think that I got the short end of it all. I live with my father and I don't know him. We are perfect strangers.

This is what I know of my father. He is an architect. There is proof of this in a room in the basement that contains a drafting table, a phone, and architectural drawings, some in cardboard tubes. It is a room I rarely enter. From what my mother told me, architecture was not my father's first passion. It was hockey. But, even as a young man he was practical. He recognized that his athletic skills would not earn him a decent living. He headed for university and the varsity team where he played left wing, which is also Keith's position.

I admit that I like hockey more than most girls. I know a good slap shot when I see one, a bad penalty when it's taken, and a good play from the back of the net. I suspect that my brother has abilities that my father never had. On the ice, Keith has a mystical presence. He is a beautiful skater. He appears suddenly out of nowhere, steals the puck off an opponent's stick, and makes it disappear by passing it off swiftly to a teammate. His style has earned him the nickname The Phantom. This nickname has served to make him all that more intriguing to young girls who are bewitched by wizards and to older ones who are entranced by werewolves. (I don't believe in magic or sorcery. I am scholarly, a sort of girl geek.)

There is no doubt in my mind that my brother enjoys all that female attention. He throws flirtatious smiles around with the same flourish a clown distributes candies to children. Several girls approached him for his jersey when the team received new ones. This morning he threw the jersey with his number 19 on the back across my bed and said, "This is yours, if you want it." I made a show of washing the stinky smell of sweat out of it, but that was only to cover my thrill at owning it.

"Sell it to me," Denise says, fingering the sleeve.

I shake my head violently. The teal colour suits me and I like the pouncing cougar on the front. In addition, the scent still permeating the fabric is unique to my brother. It brings me a strange, unexpected comfort.

Denise came over to the house with the intent of studying for a geography test but we have gotten side-tracked. She has navigated to an internet site where she swears there is a naked guy who looks like Robbie Daschind, a senior who made us carry his books to his class during frosh week. He has not looked in our direction since, but we are denying reality and believe he may deem to talk to us again.

"This guy is super hot," I admit, "but he doesn't look a thing like Robbie Dasch..."

I hear the doorknob turn and my father enters my room unannounced as I scramble hurriedly to click off the image on my oversized screen.

"Christine, I was wondering..." my father says. His words stick in his throat. His eyes are glued on the darkening screen.

There is only one sure defence in so desperate a situation: go immediately on the offensive. "You should knock before coming into my room. I could have been undressing. If you won't respect my privacy, I want a lock on my door."

"I don't think you need more privacy," my father says, "I think I need to move the computer to the living-room so I can keep an eye on what you're looking at on that thing."

I am furious that he is chastising me in front of my girlfriend. Denise is staring at him wide-eyed as if right before her eyes my previously-reserved father has been transformed into an ochre. He turns around and I hear him clamber down the steps. Soon I hear my brother laughing. After a while Keith knocks, and waits for my permission before he sticks his head around the door.

"Is it true you two are looking at pornography up here?"

"Hardly," I say. I am equating what Denise and I were doing to studying the statue of David in an art book. "And how come he's talking to you about this?"

"He didn't really. He just said he thought we had software that screened out that kind of stuff. He's on the phone with mom now giving her an earful."

"Great," I say. "She would be just the person to provide moral advice, wouldn't she, being as she whored around."

"Christine," Denise says, mouth agape. "she's *still* your mother."

"Mmm" is all Keith says. It's all he has ever said on the topic of my mother and Jason.

"So who were you girls ogling on the computer?" my brother asks, eyebrows dancing. Denise giggles. I could slap her.

"None of your business" I say, "Anyway guys look sexier with their pants on. It adds to the mystery." I remember with a puzzling fondness that not so many months ago, my mother hadn't allowed me to wear a top that was too revealing. She had said that mystery was an aphrodisiac. I guess Jason was one mystery worth solving.

"I'll have to keep that in mind," my brother says. Denise giggles again and this time I do slap her.

Keith is so popular that the coach has had to intervene when girls have knocked on the team's dressing room door asking for his autograph. The coach has been very clear about distractions and the girls get sent away in a gruff voice.

Now that I am in the same school as my brother, I too, have become popular, but in a way I had never expected. Once, when I am standing at the washroom mirror applying make-up, some girl I have never met, squints at my reflection. "Aren't you Keith Forbes's kid sister?"

I want to shout at her, "I am me, Christine Forbes. I am not a catalyst to my brother." Instead I deny his presence in my life. "Nope, never heard of the guy."

Later, she spots me exchanging brown bag lunches with him in the school cafeteria and knows I lied.

"Could you try and pay more attention when you grab your lunch out of the fridge," I say to Keith.

Instead of acting like someone who has just been scolded, he gives me a foolish grin which he expects will pass for an apology, "I knew it wasn't mine as soon as I saw the raw broccoli. I don't know how you can eat that stuff."

To his credit, my father has not expected me to take on any cooking chores now that my mother has left. He has hired a housekeeper who leaves food in the fridge to be warmed when my father comes home from his firm's office. He has also insisted that my brother and I continue the same duty roster my mother set up. This evening it is Keith's turn to set the table and I will be on clean up.

By habit Keith has put out four of everything. My father and I stare at the table as if there is a viper where my mother used to sit. When Keith realizes what he has done, he says, "Oh fuck" and puts away the extra setting. We sit down to supper and to an uncomfortable silence.

Then my father studies me curiously. "Christine are you wearing lipstick?" I have just today changed to a brighter colour that is now the rage. My father looks at my brother and asks, "Is that much make-up normal at her age?"

"Why the fuck are you asking him?" I ask.

"Please watch your language," my father says, ignoring my question.

"Keith said the F-word and it was alright then. Why is it different now?"

"We'll talk about this later," my father says. No doubt after he has consulted my mother again. I wonder how uncomfortable it is for him to consult so regularly with his adulterous wife. I'm miffed that I was dismissed. I'm thinking that I should pump the lipstick to a bright red to see how that goes over. I make little piles of my food. Carrots in one corner, mashed potatoes in the other, whatever this meat thing is in another corner. Then I smash the piles down with my fork creating fork roads through everything.

"Not hungry?" Keith asks "or is Food Art something new they're teaching in Grade nine?"

"I'm in the advanced Math stream," I remind him. "I'm taking Grade 10 Calculus in lieu of Art."

"In lieu of," he says, imitating me. My brother cannot abide pretentiousness of any form which I wouldn't mind if his vocab was not limited to what he hears in the hockey arena.

"It means instead of," I say.

"So why didn't you say instead of?" Keith says, "If you're not going to eat that meatloaf, I'll take it."

So, that's what that is. It doesn't taste anything like our mother's meatloaf.

"It's all yours," I say pushing my plate towards him.

My father interrupts the exchange of food. "Christine, please finish what's on your plate. Keith, there's more meat loaf in the oven. Serve yourself." This is something new. My father never bothered with our eating habits, leaving my mother to rule at the table. I eat most of the food and this seems to satisfy him. I get up and announce that I have a date.

"On a week night?" my father says.

"It's a study date," I say. "He's my lab partner."

"Anybody I know?" Keith asks.

"Not likely," I say, poised to make a run for the living-room. "He's human."

This wisecrack gets me chased through the living-room, down the stairs to the recreation room where I circle the ping pong table twice, then run back up the stairs. I am losing ground so I head for the washroom and lock myself inside.

"You'll have to come out sometime," Keith says menacingly from the other side of the door. He jiggles the door knob. I am sitting on the tub's edge trying to catch my breath. I know that on the other side of the door he is not even breathing heavy, and that if he had wanted to catch me he would have. He is not a big hockey player; he avoids being the victim of team enforcers by outskating and outmanoeuvring them.

I wait until I hear his footsteps in the hallway then I skulk out of the bathroom slowly, passing each doorway carefully and with trepidation, knowing he is hiding and ready to pounce. Just as I pass the broom closet he jumps out behind me. I run screeching into the kitchen where my father is trying to enjoy a piece of pie with his coffee.

"Don't forget you're on clean up duty," my father reminds me as I run behind his chair--and just as the doorbell rings.

"Must be your lab partner Keith says, "Dr. Jekyll."

"I'm not ready. Can you let him in?"

"I'd like to meet him," my father announces, "I'll let him in."

I look at Keith for help but he just shrugs. I run up the stairs and into my room. I hurry up, trading my scruffy jeans for newer ones. I am so concerned about my father grilling Bert, who is the shyest guy in my class, that I inadvertently put both feet in the same pant leg and nearly fall over. Poor

innocent Bert. He had no lab partner: he is a genius and scares the other girls away with his sombre dark moods. We are heading for the Science Fair together. However, presently, he is no doubt being subjected to questions from an overprotective father.

Whatever interrogation went on it is over when I get downstairs. Bert is sitting at the dining-room table with his chemistry book open at the periodic table. In the kitchen, my father is stacking the dishes in the dishwasher which is officially my job as per the rotation. Keith is in there with him and they are laughing. Soon Keith goes out to the arena for his team's practise and my father disappears down to his basement office.

Bert moves his chair closer so he can show me something in the book. Then he kisses me and it is perhaps his first kiss because afterwards, he looks at me as if I am someone special and celestial like Joan of Arc. He kisses me again and then nuzzles my neck. This tickles. Then I feel him latch on like a sea lamprey and I am stunned as I do not know where he got the idea that I was okay with him sucking on my neck. I demand he stop. He looks at me, confounded and a little embarrassed. Outraged, I send him out into the snow. He has forgotten his best pen, and I would love to throw it out after him, but he is already a dark shape in the distant night. I pack the pen in with my school things. The next day I wear a turtleneck to cover the hickey. I have no choice but to keep Bert as my lab partner. We are feeling our way around a silent discomfort that makes it hard to conduct that day's experiments. We may blow up the lab for lack of communication. I slide his Scheaffer pen to his side of the bench without a word.

By suppertime the next night the mark on my neck has turned a hideous purple. I put on a high-necked blouse and descend to the living-room where my father is reading the paper. I note that we are alone.

"Where's Keith?" I ask.

"He had to get his assignments for the next two weeks while he is on the road so I decided to wait until he got home to serve dinner. There's salad if you're hungry."

"I can wait," I say. The realization that I will be alone with my father while Keith is away feels like ice water thrown in my face. Keith acts like a mediator. When my brother is in the room I feel more relaxed around my father.

"I shouldn't think he'll be that late," he says with a smile, and then the smile fades like a monitor that has had its lifeblood yanked at the socket. "What's that on your neck? Is that what I think it is?" He reaches over and turns down my collar. "Christine, how could you let a guy do that to you? Don't you have any respect for yourself?"

I didn't want the hickey and I hate it, but my father is having a conniption about a mark on my neck. In the meantime, our phone rings at least twice a week, often more, because some girl is looking for a good time, which is apparently to be provided by his son.

"Get over it," I say, "it's just a hickey. It's not like I've come home pregnant or anything."

My sarcasm and the disrespect it conveys undoes him. "You will not use that tone of voice with me, Christine. You go up to your room and stay there until dinner time."

I climb the stairs to my room and lie on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Resentment courses through me. I try to cease on any bit of insight that would explain the growing chasm between my father and me. I punch my pillow in frustration.

I hear Keith come home. Eventually, he is sent upstairs to get me for supper. His quiet demeanour is proof that he knows something of my disgrace. I sit at the table in silence while they discuss tonight's home game.

Unexpectedly, Keith turns to me. "You coming to the game tonight, Christy? I'll score a goal for you if you come."

"Oh please," I snap. "Score for your team if you like, but don't do it for me. I'm not one of your empty-headed jersey-chasing puck bunnies."

They are both staring at me. I can tell that they think I'm an alien who has been dropped into their midst to test their tolerance of a new life form.

Eventually my father speaks. "Christine," he says in an extremely level and restrained voice. "Since you didn't do the clean up last night, I'd appreciate it if you'd do that for your brother tonight."

While I clear the table, I exhale a lot of heavy sighs to let my father know I am unhappy with his decree. While I am piling the dishes into the dishwasher, my father leaves the room, but Keith stays behind. Somehow they managed to pre-arrange this scenario without a word between them.

"So, Miss High and Mighty, want to tell me what gives?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm not one of your jersey-chasing puck bunnies," he quotes me, his voice pitched high in mockery.

At first I say nothing though I am tempted to tell him he forgot the empty-headed part. Then, I gush like a volcano that's been under pressure. "It's always Keith this and Keith that. At school, I'm Keith's little sister. At home, it's Keith, Keith, Keith and hockey, hockey, hockey."

"You're as crazy about hockey as anyone in this house. Or at least you used to be before mom left."

It was a mistake to mention my mother. He who never talks about her. He triggers in me an emotional tornado.

"Don't even mention that witch. I hate her. I hate her for splitting up our family for that jackass Jason. I try hard not to cry but involuntary tears well up in my eyes. "I hate her and I miss her at the same time. "

"I hear you," Keith says. He hands me a piece of paper towel to daub my tears.

"It's not the same for you. You and dad are close. You've always been close. He's never been there for me."

"He's trying to be there now."

“And he’s suffocating me in the process.”

“Ah yes, the hickey. Let me see that thing.” I slap his hand but he just laughs while he peers at Bert’s work. “I wouldn’t have thought that little pipsqueak would have that much suction in him.”

“Shut up. I hate it. I told him to stop. I should have given him a good kick in the... never mind.”

“Ouch,” Keith says, crossing his legs. He leans on the door frame and puts his hands in his jeans’ front pockets. He looks hesitant, unsure of himself. And soon I know why: he’s entering territory he has not gone into before. “You know this is my last year of high school, Christine. After this, I’m off to university, and you’ll be alone with Dad.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I say

“He’s not a bad guy,” he says, “if you give him half a chance.”

I hear a vehicle pull into our driveway, prompting Keith to check his watch. His teammate is here to pick him up. Soon it is only the two of us in the house: my father and me. To get to my bedroom, I must pass my father in the living-room.

“Christine, my father says, stopping me just when I think I have skimmed by. “Are you finished your homework?”

“We had a study period today and I did it then.”

“Study period. Don’t remember getting those in high school. Mind you that was in the dark ages.”

“Before the dinosaurs?” I say. Immediately, I regret my joke. It came out sounding derisive.

To my relief he smiles, “Not that far back.” He neatly folds his newspaper. “Since you are finished your homework, would you like to attend the game tonight? I’m sure you’ve noticed there’s an empty seat beside mine.”

“You want me to sit in *mom’s* seat?”

“It’s paid for until this season ends. May as well make use of it. But it’s entirely up to you. If you’d rather sit with kids your own age....”

“Seriously? I can sit at centre ice?”

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When my father and I enter the arena, he leads me to the red seats where the season ticket holders sit. I am always amazed how much better the view of the ice surface is from here. Usually I sit with my friends at one end or the other of the arena. The cheap seats. This is privileged seating.

I can tell right away that our team, the Cougars, are hungry for a win on home ice before they start their road trip. Within the first five minutes, Mark “Bullet” Halward, our flamboyant centre, takes a puck off Keith and sends it straight between the visiting goalie’s legs. Despite myself I jump up and punch the air with my fist. Then midway through the first period Sandy Berkinshaw comes out of nowhere and flips another goal into the side of the net. Keith gets an assist on that goal though I didn’t

see how. I ask my father if he saw the play. He begins to describe it to me, but unbelievably, our team scores again, and we both miss it because we weren't paying attention.

"Fuck," I say. "I missed that."

"Christine, your language," my father admonishes.

"Sorry."

After Bullet scores his second goal, and our team is ahead three-zero, the visiting team is discombobulated. The green alligators on their jerseys seem to crank their jaws open angrily and in unison. Their coach gathers the Gators together for a conference in front of their bench. I cannot hear what kind of pep talk he is giving his team, but he will not want to go into the second period behind by three goals. The goals by our team hurt the Gators, but the lack of goals on their part hurts more. Now their beefy guys, the team enforcers, come out. One of them begins to shadow Keith. Another one pursues Bullet down the ice toward the Gators' goal. I am watching Bullet and Sandy, our talented right-winger, passing the puck in front of the net when I hear an awful crunch against the glass above the board. My eyes seek the source of the noise. I skim the board to the blue line on the other side of the arena. I watch my brother slide to the ice. He is not moving. A whistle stops the game. Keith is still not moving. Medical aid comes onto the ice.

I can't help myself. I take my father's hand. And I pray. They ask for the stretcher. Keith will not be skating off the ice; he is that badly injured. Still holding my hand, my father leads me towards the people who can give us the information we are both anxious to know. Looks like a shoulder injury, the assistant coach tells us, but not serious, at least that is the hope.

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At the hospital, my father and I wait while they take X-rays. Out of courtesy, my father calls my mother and she shows up without Jason.

"At least she didn't bring El Creep-o," I whisper conspiratorially to my father.

"Christine," my father whispers back, "please be civil." But, I have caught the smile playing at the corners of his lips. He finds my humour amusing if inappropriate. I know him better than I thought.

My parents say their hellos and then they sit across from each other. I sit with my father, showing my allegiance to the king. The queen regards me in a strange way. I hope she is not going to mention the hickey. Oh, please, please, please no body mention the hickey, I beg silently.

"I heard you're thinking of running for student council," my mother says after a long period of silence. This is a subject I discussed with only one person: Denise. And there is only one way Denise could have transmitted the news to my mother: Keith. Keith and Denise have been having secret conversations about *me*, about *my future*. I rack my brain. When was my best friend alone with my brother long enough to discuss my plans with him? Oh, she is in so much trouble. I may unfriend her. And Keith? Passing this news on to my mother without my permission. I am thinking of digging up the rubber snake he put in my bed...so long ago that he has forgotten I kept it.

"I think you would make an excellent student representative," my mother says.

"I agree," my father says. It is the first thing my parents have agreed about in a long while.

They release Keith to us. Dislocated shoulder. My mother fusses over him, and he is enjoying the attention. He looks as happy as a seagull at a chip stand.

"You don't look like you're in much pain," I say.

"Good drugs," he says with a grin that crooks his mouth.

"I think I better get him home," my father says.

He loops Keith's good arm over his shoulder and we begin to walk out of the hospital together. I turn around to look at my mother and she blows me a kiss. I grant her a tentative smile. I may learn to forgive her. I might even get to enjoy my father's company. But there is one thing that is certain: I will never forgive Keith for giving me the scariest moment of my life.

So far.

THE END