



THE OTHER
SIDE
OF
PERFECT

MELANIE FLORENCE
AND RICHARD SCRIMGER

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY BEVERLY JOHNSON

www.scholastic.ca

First published as *Autumn Bird and the Runaway* in 2022.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The other side of perfect / Melanie Florence and Richard Scrimger ;
cover illustration by Beverly Johnson.

Other titles: Autumn Bird & the runaway

Names: Florence, Melanie, author | Scrimger, Richard, 1957- author.

Description: Originally published under title: Autumn Bird & the runaway. |
Previously published in 2022.

Identifiers: Canadiana 2025031889X | ISBN 9781039719224 (softcover)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8611.L668 A94 2026 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

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CODY

Cody stares at his father's hands.

The hands tell how Dad is feeling. They let Cody know if trouble is coming. That's why he pays attention to them.

So far, things seem fine. The hands are busy, carrying a piece of pizza to his mouth. It's dinnertime. The two of them sit at the small kitchen table under the bare bulb.

Dad slides the last slice of pizza into his mouth, like a sheet of drywall into a truck bed. His jaws chomp up and down. His hands hover in front of his mouth. He licks them and wipes them on his jeans. He grabs the can of beer and lifts it to his mouth. He slurps, chews, swallows.

The pizza box is empty. Cody wants to get up, but the table is jammed against the wall, and he's jammed into the corner seat.

He can't leave until Dad does. And Dad isn't moving. He's drinking and talking.

He's telling another story about a guy named Joe from work.

"Did I ever tell you about Joe and the elevator?" he says, belching.

Cody shakes his head—which is a lie. Dad doesn't have many stories. He's told the elevator one before. It takes a few minutes. Cody tunes out.

The kitchen counter and floor are getting dirty. Cody reminds himself to clean tomorrow, while Dad is out. Dad says cleaning is for girls. Once he caught Cody on his knees washing the kitchen floor and kicked him. Hard. "Don't ever let me catch you doing that again," he said. Now Cody cleans in secret. Does Dad think a mysterious girl sneaks in? Does he even notice?

He's reached the point in the story where Joe steps into the elevator shaft without realizing that the elevator isn't there.

"They're all like that. It's the firewater."

Dad tosses away the empty beer can and goes on with the story. Cody knows what happened. Joe saved himself by grabbing the elevator cable and swinging to safety on the floor below. Which always struck Cody as cool and athletic. But Dad likes to make fun of Joe.

He's laughing now, his hands open on the table. They're like huge shovels, tanned brown, rough skinned. Knuckles like walnuts. Dirt under the nails.

There's a thin wedding ring on the left hand, the nearer one. Cody can't help smiling at the idea of Dad getting married. Wearing the suit, standing at the altar, saying the words,

kissing the bride. It's a funny picture. Dad and Mom getting married. Dad and Mom kissing. Dad and Mom doing anything together that didn't involve yelling or throwing things.

Funny. The way choking to death on dessert is funny. The way drowning in a bathtub is funny. The way being crushed by a piñata full of candy is funny. Something that should be good for you, that should be nice, something you look forward to—that thing turning out to be horrible.

Not funny *ha ha*. Funny *oooooh*.

“What are you smiling at?”

Cody snaps to attention. What's happening? What has he missed?

Dad's chair is away from the table. He's frowning like a thunderhead. His hands are on his thighs. Uh-oh.

“I was just, uh, thinking about Joe and the, uh, elevator.”

“I finished that story. Now I'm talking about me getting fired and Joe keeping his job. Joe telling me it's too bad I'm behind on rent. A drunken Indian feeling sorry for me. Think that's funny? Do you? Do you think that's funny?”

“I don't. I—”

“You got rocks in your head? Huh? Rocks in there, dumb-bell? Dumbhead? Bonehead? Dumb—rock—bone—”

He starts to sputter.

Cody is frightened. But Dad talking gibberish about bones

and rocks and bells is actually funny. Can you be scared and amused at the same time?

Yes. Yes, you can.

But not for long.

Cody stops laughing when his dad hits him.

“Don’t laugh at me!”

His face is as red as his hair. Fire red. His hands are not open anymore. They are clenched into fists. The one that hits Cody is the one with the wedding ring. It snaps super fast. Like a snake. Like a mousetrap. It catches him on the cheek—once, twice. His head rings like a bell. A dumbbell. *Ding-dong*. Cody sprawls against the back of his chair. Dad pulls him away from the table and hits him again. And again. Left fist, right fist.

“You laughing now?” he shouts. “Are you? Are you laughing?”

He pushes Cody into the living room. Cody staggers and falls to his hands and knees. He isn’t as scared as he was a minute ago. It’s too late for scared.

Dad’s never been this mad before. Cody knows he should do something. But what? No point in fighting. Dad weighs three times as much as him, and it isn’t all fat and beer. Dad’s arms are mostly muscle, with those huge fists at the end. What to do?

Apart from not laughing, that is.

Cody's mind is not racing. It's drifting. Like a scene in the movies that's slow motion and out of focus. What to do?
Whaaat tooooo dooo?

There's Dad's fist at the end of his arm. Which makes it about an arm's length away. Here it comes. Now Cody's lying on his back.

There's Dad's shoe on the end of his leg. Which makes it about a leg's length away. Is that a thing?

Cody turns his head. There's the door. Think about that.

Think about going out the door. Think about doing that.

Here comes the shoe. Cody's world goes black.