

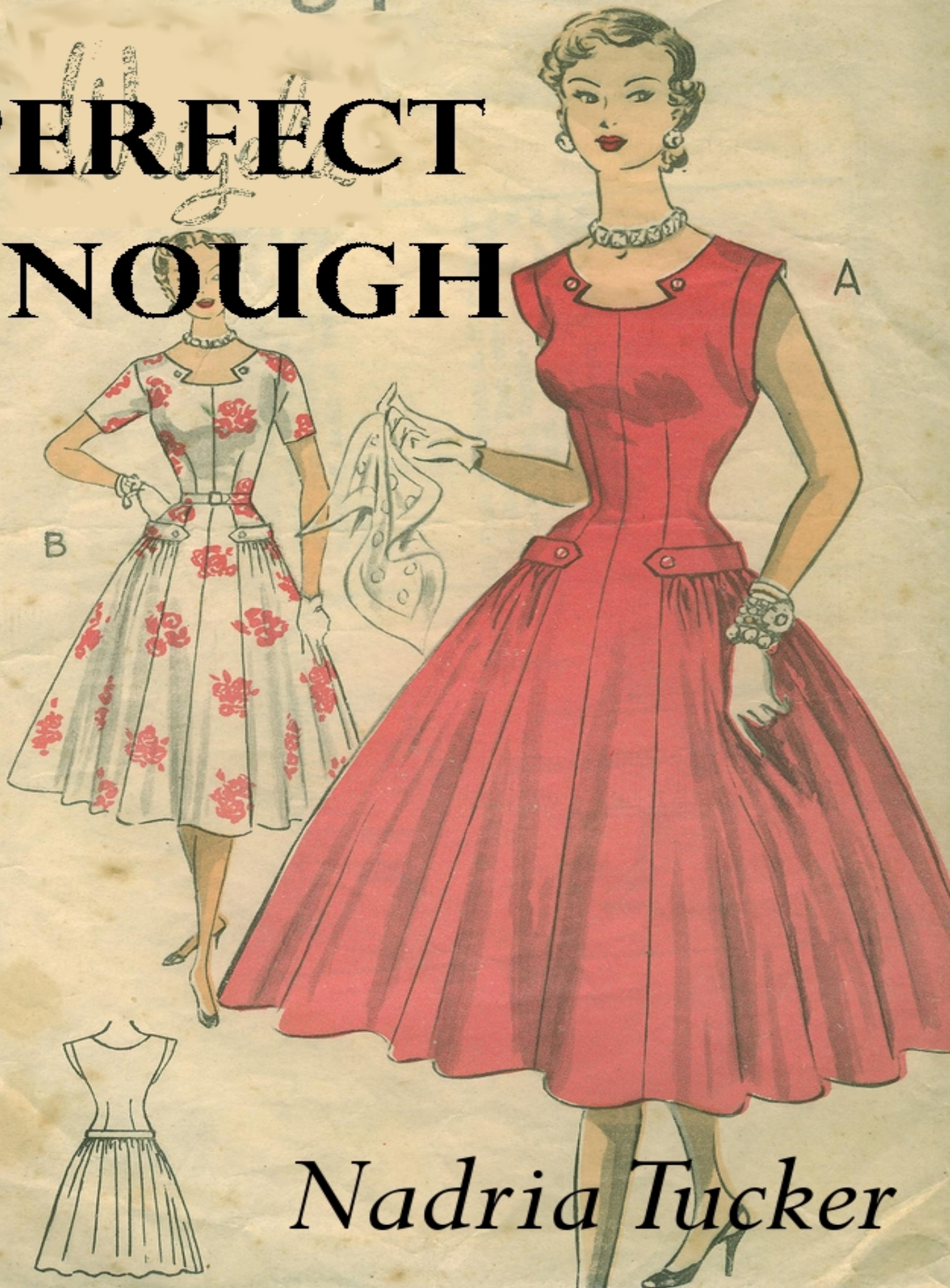
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# PERFECT ENOUGH



*Nadria Tucker*

# **Perfect Enough**

I messed up in rehearsal, but I tried. All the white girls got it right.

The choreographer, a white man maybe Mamma's age, called for a five-minute break. I walked off the stage, down into the pit to talk to him.

"You got me up front, and I'm not the best dancer. Put me in the back. Please."

"You'll be fine, Miss Ebony. You got rhythm. It's in your blood, honey."

He winked and held his hand up for a high five. I gave it to him.

After rehearsal, I jogged home, sweat soaking through my tracksuit. The overstuffed book bag strapped to my back weighed me down, making the workout harder, like a soldier in full gear. I had to drop another five pounds before the pageant—in a perfect world, I'd drop ten.

Past a sign: "Welcome to Irondale."

318 sat next to a field full of cows and the bones of old or burnt-out trailers. In the morning, the air smelled like shit. Our single-wide—green with white stripes—had nearly overgrown with wisteria that wrapped snake-like around the whole thing, creeping in between the seams, making the whole place drafty inside.

I ran up onto the too-small porch and stood for a while, stretching and shivering. The tracksuit didn't keep out the cold.

A large print of black nude bodies hung above the second-hand kitchen table.

I sat under that print at the small table eating a salad and re-reading *Win!*. Mamma sat across from me, picking at a plate of ribs and half-staring at the TV in the living room. She had long braids in her hair today, fresh fake nails, too much makeup, and her nametag—on her way to work.

"Just don't be disappointed if you don't win," Mamma said.

"What?"

"Don't be surprised if a white girl wins."

"If a black man can get elected president, I can win a beauty pageant."

"Don't forget to call Aunt Sandra today and thank her. Don't know why she wasted her money paying for that pageant. Should've given it to me to pay some bills around here."

"I already thanked her. I call her all the time. How come ya'll don't talk?"

Mamma threw on a slouchy coat and left. I did the dishes, like always.

I went into the bathroom and started the after-dinner beauty routine: tooth whitening strips and skin bleaching cream. The strips burned my gums and the cream burned my face, but the pain was worth it. I swore I could see tiny little difference, a shade or two, and that made me smile—a perfect, white smile.

With the strips on my teeth and the cream on my face, I looked at myself in the mirror and

practiced: “What’s the biggest problem facing teenagers today? Ourselves. We’re a generation of lazy underachievers who need to learn that hard work pays off. What’s your town known for? Cow manure! Hold for laughs . . . Actually Irondale is the setting of Fannie Flagg’s famous novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. Why’d you enter the Junior Miss Birmingham pageant? To win . . . to go to State . . . then Nationals . . . maybe get the hell out of Alabama.”

I smiled, fake.

Voices coming from the porch woke me up—Mamma and some guy.

I waited a while after I heard them come inside. Then, I crept out of my room and checked to make sure the front door was locked. Of course not. I turned the deadbolt. I turned around to head back to bed and saw Mamma asleep naked on the couch with a man. He opened his eyes and caught my eye. Probably the man paid our rent now. One thing about Mamma—she worked for her money.

Sunday morning I skipped church to go for a run. Aunt Sandra always said, “God helps those who help themselves,” and that made skipping church to do important things okay. I put on my tracksuit and ran as far as I could down Hwy 93. When I got too tired to run any further, I turned around and ran back to the trailer. I made it onto the porch before my legs turned to Jell-O.

Mamma came home from church while I took a shower. We passed each other in the hallway, me wrapped in a towel, her squeezed into a tracksuit. She’d already changed out of her church clothes. Nice clothes made Mamma uncomfortable.

“Time to pluck your eyebrows, isn’t it? They look a little . . .”

“I’m on my way to do them right now.”

“Good . . .” Mamma said, and stood there, no doubt thinking of something else to pick on. “He found a snake in the yard yesterday.”

“Who did?”

“Jimmy,” Mamma said. “My new friend.”

*Friend* meant *boyfriend*.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You’re afraid of snakes.”

“No, Mamma. You’re afraid of snakes. What did he do with it?”

“He killed it.”

“Where were you?”

“Hiding in the house.”

“It’s not a house. It’s a trailer.”

Mamma shrugged. “Same difference.”

“No. That’s like you saying you’re a sales representative.”

“I am.”

“You’re a cashier. You stand behind a counter and ring up hotcakes at the diner. Sometimes you even pour coffee.”

“And what are you? You’re a child.” Mamma’s favorite line. “You don’t even have a job. You’re nothing.”

I went to my room and slammed the door. I stood in front of the mirror for a good long time, stared at myself, the buzz of a lawnmower down the street drowning out anything Mamma shouted through the door—if she even bothered to shout. I grabbed a pair of tweezers and plucked my eyebrows into two thin lines. Then I kept going. I didn’t stop until they were gone. My hand shaking, I drew a perfectly arched pair of makeup-pencil eyebrows in their place. The fake ones came out prettier than the real ones. If I really was nothing, then nothing never looked so good.

Karen came to the trailer for a practice session. I helped her with her writing. Not as good as my essay about being black in the South, but they can’t all be winners.

She helped me with my choreography.

“Keep working. You’ll get it.”

“It has to be perfect for me to have any chance at all.”

“I think your chances are as good as anybody else’s. If anything, you being the only black girl helps.”

“You know,” said Mamma, “I did pageants. Miss Jefferson County. 1984. Seventeen years old.”

I already knew where this story led. I stepped away and practiced the dance routine while Mamma laid it out for Karen.

“You won?”

“It said in the papers, ‘Desiree Jenkins Destined to Go Places’ and it had a picture of me in my gown.”

“Did you go to State?”

“No . . . I got pregnant.” Mamma made *pregnant* sound like *cancer*.

“And that, Karen, is why we use condoms.”

“Keep running that smart mouth and see what happens,” Mamma said, and walked out of the room.

“I better go,” Karen said. “I need to get home for dinner.”

“I’m sorry.”

“My mom and I fight, too.”

“Really?”

Karen nodded. “She gives me shit about my cell phone bill.”

I noticed for the first time how blue Karen’s eyes were. I didn’t have a cell phone.

Aunt Sandra invited me over for a fancy dinner. I borrowed Mamma's car and it took me an hour of driving through real nice neighborhoods to get there. "Welcome to Mountain Brook." Even the name sounded better than Irondale.

Aunt Sandra's house looked perfect, clean and nice, and she belonged in it, with her neat, short hair and pressed button-down shirt. She probably didn't own a single tracksuit. Mamma said short hair made a woman look mannish, but Aunt Sandra didn't. She looked right.

"They gave out the preliminary awards. I won for academics."

"Congratulations," Aunt Sandra said. "It's not too early to apply for scholarships—no matter what happens with the pageant."

"Mamma says I should get a job."

"Do you think you have time? With school and extra-curriculars? She shouldn't be . . . How many times do I have to ask you to come and live with me? I get lonely in this big old house. And it would take some of the financial pressure off your mother . . ."

"She said she doesn't want me living with you so I can pick up your bourgie ways."

"If she's trying to call me *bourgeoisie* . . . that's a compliment."

We ate in silence for a while.

"Do you know why Uncle Marcus and I got divorced?"

"He cheated on you?" Mamma said he got tired of Aunt Sandra's flat ass and went looking for a real woman.

"Your mother . . . I walked in on Marcus and Desiree during the Fourth of July party last year. I'm sorry to say it, Ebony, but your mother is . . . not the kind of person you want to grow up to be."

Mamma laid on the couch, watching TV.

"I wanna move in with Aunt Sandra," I said, using my calm pageant voice. "Your bills will be less, and I won't have to get a job. Aunt Sandra says—"

"Aunt Sandra says. Aunt Sandra says. What does the all-knowing Aunt Sandra say today?"

"She says I don't have time for a job. I need to focus on getting ready for college and the real world. Aunt Sandra says black people have to work harder—"

"Your Aunt Sandra is an Uncle Tom."

Mamma turned up the volume on the TV.

Out on the porch, I couldn't hear the TV, but from there, I could see far into the cow pasture. I spotted a figure moving between the old trailers.

I grabbed a flashlight and walked to the fence separating the pasture from the rest of the trailer park. The neighbors over here were real rednecks. I had to be careful they didn't see me and shoot me or something. I knelt down and stuck my arm through a gap in the barbed wire fence, then my chest, then my whole body.

The cows must've been sleeping cause they didn't budge, even when I walked through the middle of them, shining light on the ground. I went over to where I'd spotted the thing from

the porch, between two charred-black trailers. They'd moved everything here when the trailer park had burned all those years ago. Too cheap to even throw it all away.

I saw something standing there, in the dark, a tall figure in a long dress. I took a deep breath, then stepped closer. I shone the flashlight on it and the dark figure became clear—burnt curtains melted onto a dress-form, still attached to the window. Maybe a fashion designer had lived here. Probably just a seamstress.

Day before the pageant: manicure, pedicure, hair extensions, at-home chemical-peel, bikini wax, one hundred extra crunches, three extra miles, dress rehearsal, photos. Awards banquet, alone.

Aunt Sandra couldn't make the banquet—she had an art opening that night.

And Mamma was working.

I couldn't sleep. Sometime near dawn I got up and walked through the trailer. The TV still blared on in the living room.

A man stood in the kitchen, in his underwear, fixing a glass of water. The same man I'd seen on the couch the other night.

"I thought you were in bed."

He sipped his water.

"Night."

"Wait," he said. "Come here. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen's a good age. And you're a pretty girl."

"I guess."

"You guess. You wouldn't enter a beauty contest if you didn't think you were pretty. Your mamma told me. She's real proud. Not just the contest. School and—"

"I find that hard to believe."

The man shrugged. "So, you think you're gonna win?"

"If I can help it."

"Did your mamma tell you I found a snake?"

"Yeah."

"Doesn't that scare you? Snakes under here . . . under your room."

"It's the vines. They're pretty . . . but they attract snakes, bugs, rats . . ."

"Don't be too hard on her. She loves you."

"She hates the pageant. She doesn't want me to go to college. She wants me to stay here forever and be a . . . be just like her."

"You're all she has, you know?"

He finished his water, left the empty cup on the counter, and headed back to bed.

I washed the glass and put it away.

The big day. Made-up, costumed, and in place for the opening dance number. I still had the spot up front. Mamma sat in the audience, with her friend, Jimmy. Aunt Sandra had come too, but she sat in a different aisle, all the way across the auditorium.

The taste of the Vaseline on my teeth made me nauseous, but it kept the smile in place.  
Lights. Curtain.

I'd helped myself. Now, I had to wait on God.

They chose Karen. She hugged me when they said it and one of my earrings got caught in her blonde hair. I pulled it out of my ear so she could go get her crown.

Aunt Sandra found me backstage and gave me a tissue. I wiped away the tears and the melted makeup sliding down my face.

"It's not the end of the world," Aunt Sandra said. "You are beautiful, but there's more to you than your looks."

Mamma helped me out of my gown. "I knew this would happen. God knows black women are only beauty queens when we take off our clothes. Look at Vanessa Williams." She zipped the gown into a garment bag and hung it over her arm.

I put on my tracksuit and said I'd walk home. Even though the cold burned my wet eyes, I took my time, going over the night in my mind, looking for mistakes I'd made. I'd won the academic award, but not the title. I was smart, but not smart enough. I was pretty, but not pretty enough.

The rednecks down by the pasture were partying out on their porch, and as I walked by, one yelled, "Brown Sugar! Damn, you look good tonight! Let me get a taste of chocolate." They all laughed.

I shot up my middle finger and sped up. As I opened the door to 318 and stepped inside the drafty single-wide, I decided there hadn't been any mistakes. I'd been perfect.

Not perfect enough.

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### **About the author:**

Nadria Tucker was born in Atmore, Alabama and grew up living the small town Southern life, which had a great influence on her work. She received an English degree from Auburn University before getting her master's in creative writing at UAB. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines. Her story "The Last Parade" was a finalist in the *New Southerner's* 2010 literary awards, and other stories have won *THE2NDHAND's* 2007 and 2008 short story competitions. Her work is featured in *THE2NDHAND's* best-of anthology, *All Hands On: THE2NDHAND After 10*, available online.

Tucker's collection of short fiction, [\*The Heaviest Corner on Earth\*](#) is available now on Amazon.com.