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Written by Tina Seskis

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One Step Too Far

Tina Seskis



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For my mother

Part One

1

July 2010

The heat is like another person to push past as I make my way along the platform. I board the train although I don't know whether I should, after all. I sit tense amongst the commuters, moving with the carriage and the crowds from my old life into my new one. The train is cool and oddly vacant-feeling, despite the people, despite the sweltering of the day outside, and this emptiness calms me a little. No-one knows my story here, I'm anonymous at last, just another young woman with a holdall. I feel adrift, like I'm not really here, but I am, I can tell, the seat is solid beneath me, the backs of houses are rushing past the window. I've done it.

It's funny how easy it is, when it really comes down to it, to get up from your life and begin a new one. All you need is enough money to start you off, and a resolve to not think about the people you're leaving behind. I tried to not look this morning, tried to just leave, but at the very last second I found myself drawn to his room and stood watching him sleeping – like a newborn really, not yet awake to the first day of the rest of his life. I couldn't risk even a peep into the room

where Charlie slept, I knew it would wake him, stop me going, so I'd quietly turned the latch and left them both.

The woman next to me is struggling with her coffee. She's wearing a dark suit and looks businesslike, a bit like I used to. She's trying to get the plastic lid off her drink, but it sticks and she tussles with it until the lid comes off with a shudder and hot coffee spurts over us both. The woman apologises noisily, but I just shake my head for her not to worry and look down into my lap, knowing I should be wiping the dark stains from my grey leather jacket – it will be ruined, it looks odd that I don't – but the eruption of coffee has upset me somehow and the hot tears mingle with the coffee ones and I pray that if I don't look up no-one will notice.

I regret now that I didn't stop and buy a newspaper but it felt inappropriate, on the day I was running away, to go into a newsagents and join a queue of *normal* people. I sit here and miss having one, miss having those closely packed words to dive into, concentrate on, chase out the evil thoughts in my mind. I'm agitated with nothing to read, nothing to do except look out the window and wish people's stares away. I watch forlornly as Manchester fizzles out and realise I may never see it again, the city I once loved. The train rushes through sunburnt fields and the odd unknown village and although we're going fast now the journey seems interminable, my body strains to get up and run, but to where? I'm already running.

I feel cold suddenly, the initially welcome cool of the air-conditioning has become a bone-withering chill, and I pull my jacket tighter. I shiver and look down and shut my leaking eyes. I'm good at crying silently, but the jacket continues to

give me away – the tear drops land gently and spread generously across the fabric. *Why did I dress up, how ridiculous was that? I'm not on a day trip, I'm running away, leaving my life, surplus to requirements*. The sounds in my head and the rhythms of the train over the track fuse together. I keep my eyes shut until the panic drifts away like ghost dust, and then I stay like that anyway.

I get off the train at Crewe. I find my way to the newsagent's, before the main concourse, and I buy papers, magazines, a paperback, I mustn't be caught out again. I hide out for a while in the ladies, where I gaze in the mirror at my pale face and ruined jacket, and I loosen my long hair to cover up the stains. I attempt a smile and it comes, twisted and fake maybe, but definitely a smile, and I hope the worst is over, at least for today. I'm hot, feverish even, so I splash at my face and the water adds new marks to my jacket, it's beyond repair. I take it off and stuff it in my holdall. I look absently at myself, seeing a stranger. I notice I quite like my hair down, it makes me look younger, the kink left from the French pleat renders it ratty, bohemian even. As I dry my hands I feel hot metal on my finger, and I realise I'm still wearing my wedding ring. I've never taken it off, not since the day Ben put it on me, on a terrace overlooking the sea. I remove it and hesitate, not sure what to do with it – it's Emily's ring, not mine anymore. My name is Catherine now. It's exquisite, the three tiny diamonds shine out from the platinum and make me sad. *He doesn't love me anymore*. So I leave it there, by the soap, in the public toilets next to Platform 2, and take the next train to Euston.

2

On an unremarkable day more than 30 years earlier, Frances Brown lay in a Chester hospital with her legs in stirrups as the doctors continued to prod about down there. She was in shock. The birth itself had been fast and animal-like, not at all typical of a first-born from the little she knew. She hadn't really known what to expect, they didn't tell you much in those days, but the one thing she most definitely had not been prepared for, after the head had crowned and the slippery red creature had flopped onto the bed beneath her, was that the doctors would tell her to deliver another.

Frances had known something was up, when the mood in the delivery room had changed in an instant, and all the doctors had come at once and huddled around her bed, conferring anxiously. She'd thought something must be wrong with her baby girl, but if so why were they poking around her instead of looking after the child? Finally the doctor looked up, and she was bemused to see that he was smiling. 'The job's not over yet, Mrs Brown,' he said. 'We've found another baby that we need to get out now.'

'I beg your pardon?' she'd said.

The consultant tried again. 'Congratulations, Mrs Brown,

you're soon to be the mother of twins. You have a second baby to deliver.'

'What d'you mean?' she'd screamed. 'I've had my bloody baby.'

Now she lay there in shock and all she could think was that she didn't want two babies, she only wanted one, she only had one cot, one pram, one set of baby clothes, one life prepared.

Frances was a planner by nature. She didn't like surprises, certainly not ones this momentous, and apart from anything else she felt far too exhausted to give birth again – the first birth may have been quick but it had been fierce and traumatic and nearly three weeks ahead of schedule. She shut her eyes and wondered when Andrew would arrive. She hadn't been able to get him at his office, he'd been out at a meeting apparently, and once the contractions had quickened to every minute and a half she'd known her only option was to call an ambulance.

So her first baby had arrived in a gush of red and a gash of loneliness – and now she was being told to deliver a second and still her husband was absent. Andrew hadn't seemed too keen on having even one baby, so God knows what he'd think of this development. She started sobbing, noisy snot-filled gulps that rang through the little hospital.

'Mrs Brown, will you control yourself!' the midwife said. Frances loathed her, with her mean features and squeaky, grating voice – what was she even doing in this job, she thought bitterly, she'd suck the joy out of any situation, even the beauty of birth.

'Can I see my baby?' Frances said. 'I haven't even seen her yet.'

'She's being checked. Just concentrate on this one.'

'I don't want to concentrate on this one. I want my real baby. Give me my real baby.' She was screeching now. The midwife got the gas and air and held it over Frances's face, pressing hard. Frances gagged and finally stopped screaming, and as she quietened the fight went out of her and something in her died, there on that hospital bed.

Andrew turned up just seconds too late to see his second daughter enter the world. He seemed flustered and awkward, especially when his hopes of a son were rewarded with not one but two baby girls. One was pink and pretty and perfectly formed, the other lay blue and grotesque on the filthy sheets, the umbilical cord stopping the air from entering her lungs and starting her life outside the womb. The atmosphere he arrived into was intense, critical. The doctor deftly unwrapped the cord from the baby's neck and cut it, and Andrew watched the blood swarm through her little body as the doctor took her across to the resuscitation unit, and one of the nurses held up a hoover and sucked the shit and scum from her airways. It was just moments before they heard the anguished angry howls. She was exactly one hour younger than her sister, and she looked and sounded like she'd come from a different planet.

'My poor darling, I am so so sorry,' Andrew whispered to his pale bedraggled wife as he took her hand, red with new life.

Frances looked at him hard, in his Dirty Harry suit and loosened tie. 'What are you sorry for? That you weren't here or that I've had twin girls?'

He couldn't quite look at her. 'For everything,' he said. 'But I'm here now and we have our ready-made family. It'll be great, you'll see.'

'Mr Brown, you need to wait outside now,' said the midwife. 'We need to clean up your wife and repair the tearing. We'll call you when you can come back in.' And she shooed him away and Frances was left alone again, with her guilt and her fear and her two baby daughters.

Frances had always thought she'd be a good mother. She'd just assumed she'd know exactly what to do – that it might not be easy but that she'd get through it, she had a handsome new husband, a supportive family, a maternal instinct. But when it came to it the trauma of the birth and the doubling of her expectations left her at a loss. She had two babies, not one – and they seemed to need feeding or rocking or changing *constantly* – and a husband who appeared to have drifted away from her whilst the baby (babies!) had been growing inside her.

They couldn't even think what to call their second daughter. They'd decided weeks ago on Emily for a girl, full name Catherine Emily – Frances thought the names sounded better that way round – but of course they hadn't known they'd need a second option. Andrew was pragmatic, and suggested calling one of the twins Catherine and the other Emily, but Frances didn't want to share the names out, they went so well together, she said, so they had to start all over again for the unexpected twin. In the end they settled on Caroline Rebecca, although Frances didn't particularly like either name – but Andrew had suggested them, and anyway

she couldn't face thinking of any others. She held that fact secret, one of the first of many, further proof that she wouldn't really have minded if the birth had been just a few seconds longer, if the cord had been that little bit tighter, if poor Caroline Rebecca had stopped breathing before she began. The effort of shoving that thought away (who could she ever tell?) took up years and years of Frances's life and turned her hard inside, right in the centre of herself where she had once been soft and motherly.

Frances spent the next seven days in hospital, and that gave her time to at least appear to recover from the trauma of the births, the absence of her husband, the fact she was quite unbelievably the new mother of twins. She decided her only option was to make the best of it, to embrace both girls, in fact maybe in the end it would be nice to have two. But it wasn't easy, Emily and Caroline were different from the start. When they were born you would hardly have known they were twins – Emily was pink and plump, Caroline thin and sickly and pallid, almost two pounds lighter than her sister. And then Caroline refused to take to her mother's breast, although Emily had no problems, and so Caroline's weight dropped as her twin's increased.

Frances was stoical by nature. She tried and tried and tried with Caroline, until her nipples bled and her nerves were ragged. She was determined to treat her two babies the same – she had to now they were both here. In the end it was one of the nurses who put her foot down and gave Caroline a bottle on the fourth day, she said they couldn't starve the child.

Caroline gripped the teat in her tiny mouth ferociously, contrarily, whilst Frances felt like a failure, and another bond was broken.

In the months after that Caroline's weight caught up fast with Emily's, she absolutely loved the bottle. Her thin limbs filled out and she took on a puffy look – all creases of skin and fat red cheeks – that Frances tried hard to find appealing. It was as if Caroline couldn't grow up fast enough, couldn't wait to get one over on Emily, even at this age. She was the first to crawl, the first to walk, the first to spit her solids into her mother's face. Frances found her a handful.

The twins grew more physically alike as they got older. By the time they were three they'd lost their baby fat, their hair had grown thick and straight, and they sported matching blunt bobs that Frances did herself. She dressed them the same – that's what people did in the seventies – and it became hard to tell them apart.

Only their temperaments gave them away. Emily seemed to have been born happy and placid, able to simply go along with the world and make the best of what came her way. Caroline was strung out. She couldn't stand surprises, hated not getting her own way, went mad at loud noises, but most of all she couldn't bear her mother's easy love for her sister. Still a survivor in those days, Caroline turned to her father for support, but Andrew seemed rather vague and absent in his role as a parent, as if it all was a bit too *vivid* for him, and Caroline was left looking in on the family as though she wasn't really meant to be there. Frances was careful to never show any overt favouritism – the twins always had the same food,

same clothes, same kisses at bedtime, but each twin sensed the gargantuan toll this took on their mother, and it left a burden on each of them.

It was a cold wet afternoon on a housing estate in Chester, and the five-year-old twins were bored. Their mother had gone food shopping and Andrew was meant to be minding them, albeit whilst half-listening to the football on the crackly Roberts radio he'd brought in from his shed. But Andrew had disappeared into the kitchen ages ago, to make another phone call they'd assumed, that's what he usually did when their mother was out, and they'd grown tired of their map puzzle, it was too hard without their father to help them. They lay now at each end of the brown velveteen couch, kicking each other's legs aimlessly, and not entirely painlessly, their matching red tartan dresses riding up their thighs and their knee-length brocade socks scuffing down their shins.

'OWWWW. Daddy!' yelled Caroline. 'Emily just kicked me. DAAADDY!'

Andrew poked his head round the kitchen door, stretching the cord of the wall-mounted phone until its kinks were pulled nearly straight.

'I didn't do anything, Daddy,' said Emily, truthfully. 'We're just playing.'

'Stop that, Emily,' he said mildly, and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Caroline disentangled her legs from her sister's and then launched herself across the length of the sofa and pinched her twin hard on the upper arm. 'Yes, you did,' she hissed.

'Daddy!' shrieked Emily. Andrew's head appeared again,

and he was cross now. 'Just stop it the pair of you,' he said. 'I'm on the phone,' and then he shut the kitchen door.

When Emily realised her father wasn't going to help her she stopped crying and padded across the expanse of neat beige carpet to the doll's house at the far end of the room, by the patio doors. This was Emily's favourite toy, but it was not exclusively hers – like most of her things it had to be shared, and Caroline loved to move all the furniture into the wrong rooms, or even worse take it out altogether for the dog to eat. Caroline followed her over and said coaxingly, 'Let's play teddies,' and so Emily agreed although she didn't entirely trust her sister's motives, and they'd set up their teddies for a tea party and even played quite nicely for a few minutes. Just as Caroline had tired of their half-game and stalked off to the kitchen to find her father, Emily heard a car pull up in front of the garage that formed the left side of the chalet-style house.

'Mummy!' Emily jumped off the couch and ran down the length of the living room as she heard her mother open the front door.

Caroline was on her way back from the kitchen, where she'd helped herself to a malted milk biscuit from the metal tin in the cupboard next to the cooker. Her father had quickly got off the phone and let her have one, which had surprised her, it was nearly tea time. She'd just bitten the cow's head off, planning to savour each body part, but now she crammed the rest of the biscuit into her mouth, eating urgently. As Caroline came into the hall wiping crumbs off her face she saw her twin hurtling down the lounge towards her, and her first instinct was to move, get out the way.

'Hello Mummy!' called Emily. Frances was putting down her shopping, ready to open her arms to both her daughters. But when Caroline saw Emily's joy and their mother's reciprocity she wanted to shut the scene out, it made her feel cross. As Frances set the last bag down on the orange shag rug in the middle of the sunlit hall, she looked up and saw Caroline slam the lounge door shut, hard, at precisely the right moment. And then she saw Emily come tearing through the plate glass towards her, and she heard the sound of a bomb going off.

Andrew had chased Caroline around the oval-shaped dining table whilst Frances picked shards of glass out of Emily's face and arms and legs. Miraculously, Emily's cuts were mostly superficial, but Caroline was still sent to her room until tea-time, despite Andrew trying to convince his wife that Caroline hadn't realised what would happen – she was too young, he'd said, she couldn't possibly have done it deliberately – and that they should let her come downstairs now. But Frances was unrelenting, she'd never been so furious in her life.

Later Andrew hypothesised that it was only Emily's speed at impact that saved her from Jeffrey Johnson's fate, the boy four doors down who'd been left with a livid two-inch scar on his cheek from a run-in with his own glass door. There was however one deeper cut on Emily's knee which faded over time but failed to disappear completely, and she was never able to look at it without being reminded of her sister, and of course as she got older it reminded her of all the other things Caroline had done over the years, so the scar was

much worse than it looked really. The Browns replaced the door with a wooden one after that, and although the living room was always that much darker, Frances felt happier that way.