

Catch Me Before I Fall

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with Diane Taylor

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

I am fifty-two years old and have changed my name seven times so far. I have never been able to understand why most people keep the same name from birth until death. My names change when my life changes. Perhaps those whose names don't change have lives that don't change either.

For a while I tried to keep my names separate – independent life spans with beginnings, middles and ends – but that doesn't work any more. They used to chase each other around in a blur, a perpetual process of fast forward, rewind and a few pauses in the present, but now they're still. All my names have caught up with each other.

I was born Clare Malone, the name my mother gave me. I was ten years old and living at Park Hall, a children's home in Liverpool run by an order of nuns, when I found out my mother had given me a dishonest name.

I was at Mass with my five brothers and sisters and was standing at the back of the chapel where the fumes of religion seemed more diluted. Sister Maria tapped me sharply on the shoulder. She bent down, her habit bristling, and whispered disapprovingly in my ear that my mother had arrived unexpectedly (as she always did). Sister Maria gave me a grudging nod to leave the service and I ran into the high, dark hallway. My heart always lifted when my mother turned up, although I knew hers remained steady in her chest.

She was slender and pale with elegant bones; her genes seemed to have avoided me entirely.

'Mum,' I whispered, hoping that the other nuns wouldn't catch me dodging God. 'Should we go and sit in the visitors' room?'

It was always impossible to gauge what my mother's reaction to anything would be but she didn't seem interested in sending me back to Mass. She was never a hugger and I knew that if I tried to fling my short, brown body against her in pursuit of a cuddle she would recoil. She took a step back and moved her eyes up and down me.

'Hello, Clare. How are you keeping? You seem well enough here. A bit less skinny by the looks of things.' My mother was born in Chorley and had been brought up in Preston. She moved to Liverpool before I was born and she spoke in flat Lancashire vowels rather than the accentuated 'ews' and 'euws' of Liverpool.

We went to the room with the maroon sofas and faded stripy curtains, which the children were never allowed into without the protective shield of a visiting adult. She turned her head away from me to stare out of the window. 'Yer sisters and brothers keepin' all right, Clare?'

'We're all fine, Mum,' I replied.

She draped herself over the radiator and drummed her roughened fingers against the windowsill. Her perfect limbs made her look expensive, although she rarely had any money at all. She wore a violently red blouse and black skirt, and her white-blonde hair was coiled elaborately into the nape of her neck. My mother never noticed housework. I doubted she had ever scrubbed a floor or scoured a sink the way we had to at Park Hall. Yet her hands belonged to someone who had led a harsh life and her bitten nails were as downtrodden as a scullery maid's.

The sky was a hopeless shade of grey. It looked as if it would retch sheets of metallic water forever. My mother had been on her way to the Queen's Head pub a few roads away when the downpour started. She didn't own an umbrella and impulsively decided to shelter at Park Hall.

'I'll turn up with rain tipping out of me hair and me lipstick smudged to bits,' she said, grumpily. 'And then what will Mick think? He likes to see me turned out like a proper lady.'

Her life was populated by men called Peter or Mick or Sam, who soaked up her time and her soul. I was never able to claim her the way I saw my friends at school lay claim to their mothers.

She lit a cigarette and inhaled with relief.

I knew that I had my mother to myself for as long as the rain fell and Mass lasted. It was probably the first time it had ever happened. As the two of us sat quietly I sensed I might never get another opportunity to ask the question I had always wanted to ask. My oldest brother, Damian, often sneered to me, 'You don't belong in our family, you're not like the rest of us. Look at that dark skin of yours. It doesn't look normal like ours.'

My five brothers and sisters all had creamy pink skin like my mother's and our father Sam's, while mine was a tough, dark brown. The difference was indisputable. Damian was usually right about things and I wondered often why I looked so different from the rest of the family. My mother had never said anything directly to me but I sensed she felt ashamed of me – the dark blot on the white landscape of her children. The imprint of that shame remains carved into me.

I trembled, then blurted, 'Mum, Damian told me I'm not from our family. I know I don't look like the rest of you. Am I from somewhere else? Are you really my mum and is Sam really my dad?'

Sam had been her husband before and after I was born, but had disappeared without trace one day when I was four years old. Malone was his surname.

At first I thought my mother was going to slap me. An angry vertical furrow appeared between her eyebrows and her mouth twitched downwards. Then the anger cleared. She turned towards me and her pale blue eyes filled with tears. At that moment she acknowledged what the alcohol usually pushed away – that everything worthwhile in her life had been lost to her. It made her generous with me.

'Of course I'm your mother, Clare. How else would you have got into our family?' She tried to sound cross but was becoming dreamy. 'Sam isn't your father, though. Your father was a proper gentleman, second in command to the captain of a Chilean ship. I met him when his ship docked in Liverpool. Jorge Sherriema his name was. He was such a handsome man.'

I was reeling. Although I knew there was a difference between me and the others, I had no idea it involved an unknown, unimagined father. Was he still alive? Was he a kind man? Did he have a family, a proper, cosy family, not a fragmented, tumbledown one like ours? Did he know about me? Would he want

me to go and live with him? But I couldn't ask any of the questions that swarmed through my mind. Mass was over. The door opened and my sisters and brothers filed in. My mother smiled weakly to all of them but cuddled none and her revelation ended abruptly.

Ours was by far the biggest family at Park Hall. The other children placed here arrived alone or with one other sibling, and if they didn't behave too badly managed to shrink into the wallpaper. But, because of the sheer volume of Malones, none of us was able to do that. All six of us had a different father; Damian, twelve, followed by Mary, eleven, then me, ten, Lucy, eight, Tom, six and John, four, were not only more in number, but scaggier and scruffier than the others too, at least when we first arrived. When it came to anonymity we didn't stand a chance.

We had only been at Park Hall for a few months that day my mother arrived to shelter from the rain. Soon afterwards John, Tom, Damian and Lucy were dispatched to various parts of the country to live with foster parents. Nobody ever chose Mary or me so we remained at Park Hall until we left school.

My mother's eyes kept swivelling away from us towards the sky, beseeching whoever made the rain fall to make it stop. She seemed desperate for a drink to stopper her memory. Talking to us only made her feel worse. Like Jorge we were another loss, another failure, looking her innocently in the eye. She wanted to skip away to the Queen's Head, sink into the corner booth, have three double whiskies quickly, smoke hard and let Mick rub her neck and drape his hand across her shoulder, grazing her breast, and whisper obscenities in her ear, to obliterate all thought.

She stood up, her face brightening as the sky cleared.

'Clare, make sure you braid your hair up nice and tidy. Lucy, you need to sponge that stain off your uniform or you'll have the sisters after you. Mary, make sure you're a good girl and watch over the others.'

She had once told me that she only wanted sons, and when she had another baby girl after the six of us, she looked away and handed her over for adoption as soon as the umbilical cord had been snipped. She told me, without a trace of emotion, about this seventh child much later, when I was fifteen. Perhaps because of my mother's deadpan delivery of the news, the discovery of another sister meant nothing to me. I promptly forgot about her.

My mother also muttered something about four more babies that she had miscarried or who had been stillborn after the seventh. These siblings who had never taken a breath outside the womb meant even less to me, and I didn't bother asking her for more details.

'Well, rain's stopped. I'd best be on my way. Behave all of you.' She gathered up a couple of carrier bags and, with a brief wave, eased herself out of the door. She was such a slight, unearthly presence in our lives that I began to doubt whether she had actually been in the room with us at all.

However, her words felt chunky and real. I didn't dare tell the others, as Damian would certainly gloat. I kept looking down at my brown arms and wondered about the face, the skin, the limbs of my Chilean father. All my life I had yearned for my skin to fade to the desirable pinkness of my siblings but, now I understood that my colour came from a proper gentleman, handsome too and from an exotic country I had never heard of, it was becoming, momentarily at least, a little less revolting to me. I was too young to erase the name Malone from my life but I vowed that, when I was free of the children's home, I would become Clare Sherriema. That was my first name change.

CLARE MALONE 1954–1970

Clare: a variant of my mother's name

Malone: the surname of my mother's husband, Sam

CHAPTER ONE

I was born on a dark-red couch in my mother's dirty, bare front room on 20 February 1954. She lived in a council house in Morgans Road, Page Moss, a poor area of Liverpool. Betty, the elderly lady who lived on our street and who acted as unofficial midwife to everyone in the neighbourhood, arrived just in time to witness my entry into the world.

I shot out of my mother powerfully and Betty caught me as I was about to tumble off the sofa on to the dusty floorboards. She screamed in horror: 'She's black! She's black!'

My mother's relief at expelling me from her womb was quickly replaced by panic. She tried to shush Betty in case other neighbours heard and came running to view the spectacle. My older sister, Mary, was eighteen months old at the time and says that Betty's screams that day are her earliest memory.

My mother gazed, revolted, at my coffee-coloured skin and placenta-splattered clumps of jet-black hair. I think she thought that, if she stared long and hard enough at me, I'd change into the colour of baby that she wanted me to be. She didn't seem to notice whether she'd given birth to a girl or a boy. My skin colour pushed everything else into the background.

'What on earth . . .?' Betty was stunned. I don't think she would have been any less surprised if my mother had given birth to a Martian. She placed a work-wrinkled hand over her thin mouth while thick strands of grey hair escaped from the usually

immaculate bun she wore in the nape of her neck. It looked as if the shock of my arrival had sent an electric current through her head, splaying her hair in all directions. After a minute or two, she regained her equilibrium, wrapped her hair back into its place, and started to think through the consequences of this shocking birth.

'How did you produce a baby that colour, Clara? It's a first for this neighbourhood. You certainly know how to get the tongues wagging. I can't see your Sam being too pleased at being humiliated like that!'

Both my mother and her husband, Sam, had the palest pink skin and blond hair. Although my mother was a peroxide blonde, following the fashion at the time to look like Marilyn Monroe, she was naturally fair-haired. Betty wasn't one for gossip and hadn't heard the neighbours whispering about the affair my mother had been conducting with 'that tall, dark, handsome Chilean seaman'. Of course, Sam hadn't heard the whispers either, mainly because he spent most of his time away at sea. These days the neighbourhood is home to people from a variety of races, but then non-white faces were virtually unknown in Page Moss.

My mother lay back weakly on the sofa but her brain whirled and she fixed Betty with a feverish, glassy stare. The smell of dirt, dust and my mother's fresh sweat hung unpleasantly together in the air.

'Please hang on to her for me. Just till the fuss dies down, Betty. You know what it's like round here. Once the neighbours get wind of it, Sam'll also get wind of it as soon as his ship docks next week.' She squeezed her hands together as though she were praying, and beseeched Betty for all she was worth.

'Don't be silly, Clara. Everyone round here knows you've been pregnant. They'll all want to have a peek at the baby. You can't hide the poor little mite away. It's your baby and you should be close to her, cuddling her and nursing her. What are you going to call her?'

Although my mother kept her children in a filthy, almost entirely unfurnished house, which stank of urine because we all perpetually wet the bed, she didn't like to parade this squalor to the neighbours. The entire inventory of household furniture was: two beds, one belonging to my mother and one for the three girls and

Tom; one kitchen table covered with a sticky, plastic cloth; one twin-tub washing machine, which my mother sometimes hid stolen cigarettes inside; and a set of bunk beds in the box room for the other two boys. A single bar of carbolic soap adorned our bathroom, and the biggest attraction in our kitchen was the lighter for the gas stove. We used to hold the lighter to spoonfuls of sugar and pretend we were making toffee with it when my mother wasn't around. It always tasted wonderful and we took turns to dip our tongues into the brown syrup we had created. Although my mother owned a mop bucket, I never saw her use it, and all the surfaces in the house were either dusty or sticky or both.

Just as my mother wanted to keep our living conditions private, she didn't want her sex life to become a conversation point among the neighbours. She had been anxious about giving birth to me from the moment she discovered she was pregnant because she was unsure whether my father was Sam or Jorge, whom she had met and begun an affair with when his boat docked in Liverpool in the middle of 1953. Giving birth to a black baby meant that she could not conceal her affair from them and, for her, this was the most public humiliation imaginable. Although Page Moss at the time was a working-class area with many newly built, terraced council homes just like ours, it was considered to be a respectable part of Liverpool. I don't remember seeing any black families in the neighbourhood, although it's possible there were a few.

My mother had a friend called Pat who she went off with whenever she disappeared for days on end. One of the neighbours told me, years later, that the two of them went on to the ships when they docked in Liverpool to 'do all sorts' with the sailors. But most of the people in Page Moss weren't like my mother and Pat. The women worked hard to keep their front steps scrubbed to a shine, the cushions on their sofas plumped up invitingly and their rugs and carpets dust-free.

Our house had no carpets, only floorboards, which always felt gritty and dusty under my bare feet; a sofa without cushions, which was the sole item of furniture in the living room; and a bed without sheets. Sometimes a few of us would wake in the middle of the night and creep into my mother's bedroom. If she hadn't returned, we would climb into her bed to sleep because she had the luxury of sheets on her bed. But, if she was there, either alone or with one of the many men who she brought back for the night and who we would never see a second time, we scurried back to

our prickly blankets and long, striped, tubular pillows without pillow cases. We had a scuffed, white bath in our bathroom. I don't remember ever having a bath in it. At night my mother told us to urinate into the mop bucket, which she left outside our bedroom door, instead of having to go to the outside toilet. As I lay whimpering on my mother's chest that February day, however, I was blissfully innocent of what lay ahead for me in Morgans Road.

'This goes against my better judgement, Clara,' Betty scolded. 'It's just not right for a mother to reject her little'un like this just because she's got the wrong skin colour. Sam's going to find out sooner or later.'

But my mother seemed to be getting more and more agitated about me and tried to hand me over to Betty, even though I was still connected to her by the umbilical cord. She shivered and sobbed and begged, and Betty finally relented.

'Once you start pleading with me, you know I always give in to you, Clara. But, mark my words, Sam will find out soon enough. Hush now and hold on to your little black baby while you can.' Betty snipped the cord and my mother shook her head when Betty tried to get her to continue to hold me.

'No, you take her for now, Betty love, I'm so bloody worn out.'

Distractedly she was finalising the details of her fib. What I represented was occupying all her brain space and she hadn't once glanced into my face to see who I was. 'I'll tell Sam I had a stillbirth,' she said, brightening at the prospect of getting herself out of trouble. She was so pleased with herself that she barely noticed the contractions as she expelled the placenta.

When, years later, I learned at school what purpose an umbilical cord served, I found it strange that my mother had ever grown one; she was an unlikely custodian of such a life-giving device. My mother adored alcohol and men. Poverty and marriage were no bars to her indulging in lots of both. When I was three or four years old, I watched her wistfully as she got ready to go out. As she rolled red lipstick around her mouth, she had a jittery, glittering excitement about her that she never had with us. She felt no personal shame about her excessive drinking, or about the men she had sex with when Sam's back was turned, at least some of them in exchange for money. But she felt deep shame about producing a black, bastard child and I felt she blamed me for opting for Jorge's skin in the womb rather than hers. When she

shouted at me for what she considered to be an endless stream of misdeeds, I told myself that, if I'd looked like her, she would have loved me more.

Of course, Sam did eventually find out about me. The residents of Morgans Road couldn't keep a scandal like that to themselves for long. Scenting something amiss, a trickle of neighbours knocked on our door 'to peek at' the new arrival. At first my mother tried to fob them off, but, in the end, she wearily lifted me out of the pram that doubled as my cot and let everyone gasp.

'Ooh, I say,' said Mrs Jones from Number Five. 'You don't half make life difficult for yourself, Clara Malone. What's your Sam going to say when he gets back from sea?'

My mother shrugged. 'Well, what's he going to do? Put a gun to my head? He'll come round.' She tried to sound flippant, but shuddered under her smile. Sam's wrath filled my mother with infinitely more fear than the gossiping neighbours.

When Sam arrived home from sea the house was quiet. He was a tall man and his blond, shiny hair gave him an angelic appearance that was belied by his violent streak.

'Where's the baby, Clara? I can see you've had it. Have you given me a son and heir?'

'Oh, Sam,' she said, weeping real tears and nuzzling her cheek and lips so deep into his neck that they disappeared in the folds of his skin. 'The baby died. It was a girl but she never took a breath. We buried her quick.'

Sam looked her hard in the eye, not sure whether to believe her or not. Then he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. 'Ah, poor little thing, you should take it easy, Clara. I'm off out but I'll be back later on and I'll bring you a nice pie and chips and a nip of whisky.'

She smiled and kissed him softly on the lips. 'Thanks, darlin'. You go and enjoy yerself now with yer mates. You're bound to be tired what with all that travellin'.'

She knew he would go straight to the pub and that someone there would take great pleasure in telling him the truth about me, but at least she'd bought herself some time. She sat on the couch knotting and unknotting a dirt-streaked handkerchief and rehearsing the pain of the punches. Everything was perfectly still.

Sam beat my mother regularly, and he had beaten her even harder while I was in her womb. I wonder if he suspected all along

that she was carrying another man's child. As far as I could tell, nobody else in the neighbourhood got beaten the way my mother did. Sam beat her whenever he was drunk and, when he was home from sea, he was drunk most days. My mother's screams and pleas for him to stop raining blows anywhere he could punctured many of my nights huddled under the scratchy blankets.

'For pity's sake, Sam, let me be, let me be', my mother would cry. The broken fear in her voice chilled me more than the sound of the blows.

Sam arrived home after midnight, throwing open the front door back against the wall. It was the equivalent of a drum roll before the finale of a play. Years of slamming had hewn a handle-shaped depression in the wall; it softened the bang.

He dragged my mother up from the couch where she was still shredding the handkerchief. Her blonde hair was woven into two plaits, which she'd wrapped around her head; he ripped them free. She crumpled into a limp, paper woman in his presence, submitting to her fate. There was no trace of the stern, distant mother we knew. Cowering from Sam's rage she looked like a little girl.

'You fucking bitch, making a fool out of me like that. You'll pay for that you little whore.'

He screwed up his fists and started beating her systematically in her face and chest. She clamped her eyes and lips shut, glued her fingers across her face and lay on her back on the floor, legs pulled up in the foetal position, enduring the blows until Sam's anger was spent. Her plaits had unravelled and her long blonde hair flowed like glinting water across the floorboards, which were darkened with streaks of blood that had dripped from her punched nose.

'Get rid of that black bastard or I go,' he hissed.

I had been sleeping tranquilly in an old Moses basket in Betty's bedroom, unaware of the explosion my existence had caused.

I came home the next morning. Sam stayed and glowered.