



The Skin I'm In by Mae Baxter
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"Why can't I try on different lives, like dresses, to see which one fits best?" – Sylvia Plath.

I was marvelling at the possibilities of this very question when the itching started,
The right side of my neck,
Just below my ear,
Faint,
But undoubtedly there.

My focus was instead redirected to the grimy streets of Manchester. The only source of light
a billboard, advertising a local art exhibition.

In another life, I could be a great painter in the French countryside, drawing from fields
surrounded by lavender and daisies. In this life, the sun will forever shine, the sky forever
blue.

I wish I could say the same for Manchester.

The sun rarely shines here, and if it does, it burns. The kind of heat that sticks to the back of
your neck, making you beg for a cool breeze.

Today, the wind whistles as it rushes through the pained windows. A scratched record
player, stuck on repeat.

Over,

And over

Again.

The French countryside turned all too quickly into the familiar cobblestones of the high Street. The lavender and daisies became abandoned bottles and cans. The itching at my neck was sharper now, and more prominent. In attempt to soothe the pain, or at least hide my grimace, I swept my hair across it.

It was spreading –

To my shoulders,

Legs

Arms

Clutching at my chest, I tried to keep my racing heart from leaping from my body.

How I wish to be anywhere, anywhere but here.

The sun arched across Manchester like fresh colours brushed upon an artists' canvas, the rays giving the darkening sky an orange tint.

I find comfort in the fact that these things will always stay the same, in all the lives I try on.

The stars will be there, the moon, the wretched hail, it will all stick with us.

The tedious ticking of the clock is only a reminder of the things that won't.

The traffic lights, the erratic honking of angry drivers, even the elderly couple walking in front of me. Forever changing.

Monton Bakery, 6/Cut and La Turka were beginning to close, their signs spinning in the wind.

Pulling my hood over my head, I sprinted across the road and into the familiar warmth of Costa.

The bell jingled overhead, signalling my presence to the baristas. The smell of bitter coffee beans and various delicacies engulfed me in an inviting aroma. The hissing of milk and the grinding of coffee beans was as familiar as the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Obnoxious music from the radio station drifted through the air.

As predicted, only the stragglers remained, the usual rush of pupils long gone. I got to the checkout, still unsure of what to buy.

I was met with grey, bushy eyebrows; deep wrinkles highlighting a permanent frown.

Part of me wanted to run, but I hadn't come this far to flee...

"How can I help? Make it quick, we're 'bout to close."

His voice was monotonous, raspy from smoking too much, for too long. He must be new. We haven't had anyone older than 20 working here for as long as I remember.

"Just one more minute please." I was doing well, I kept telling myself I was nearly there. So close.

My voice caught in my throat, a strangled whisper betraying the fear coiling within, a fragile thread threatening to snap.

Reluctantly, he turned around, busying himself with unnecessary jobs. Wiping the already spotless counter, switching off the oven...

It was getting bad. Worse than when I fell into a bunch of nettles at primary school. The shrill voice on the radio began to merge into one, the edges of my surroundings warping and distorting. Too much, too far...

It was hot.

It was hot and burning.

It was hot, burning, insistent, consuming, as if there was something clawing at me from beneath my skin. Fear became a tangible, living force that crept over me like some hungry beast, immobilizing me, holding me captive.

Breathe in, breathe out, Jonathan would be proud...

"Stop it," I whispered to myself. I must be going crazy. "Stop it!" I yelled. The barista shot me an agitated glance from across the counter. It quickly turned into a furious one when he saw me run off to the toilets.

Splashing ice cold water on myself did nothing to stop the pain coursing through my skin.

My hands held strong on the sink ledge; my breathing coming in irregular gasps,

Chest rising

And falling

The weight of the world threatening to suffocate me.

Will this ever go away?

Desperation etched itself into every crease of my being, begging for this all to be over. I thought despairingly back to the numerous conversations I'd had on Jonathan's sofa, whilst the smell of calming lavender and camomile filled my nostrils. No use.

Putting my head down, I watched the world around me go up in flames, letting the darkness take over.

It was beyond my control now.

Moving slowly and stiffly, as if afraid to witness what lay before me, I glanced at the mirror swaying on the wall.

And there I stood. Fresh. Clean. Unscathed.

The sudden ease was like a rush of cool water. My panting sounded loud, as I sat, exhausted, on the tiled floors.

It was wishful thinking. Thinking I had all these chances to perfect a seemingly broken life. All these lives to experiment and change.

A whisp of smoke, slipping through my fingers. The remains of a life already so foreign and unfamiliar.

Tomorrow, I will go back into Jonathon's office, back to the familiar paintings on the wall.

Just like any other Monday, but not.

Nothing's changed, and yet it has...

I am still alone, still a prisoner to my own anxiety. But with a sense of achievement

I have come far today. Further than ever before.

The beast still lingers, biting at my ankles.

But today, I have had enough.

I'll try again next week.