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Opening extract from

The Rise and Rise of Tabitha Baird

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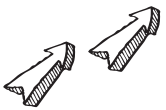
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THE EVENING BEFORE SCHOOL STARTS...



Ohgodohgodohgodohgodohgod, I feel sick. Tomorrow's my first day at the new school, Heathside Academy, and the school skirt looks really, really, *reeeeeally* bad on me. It didn't look like this last week.

I tried it on three days in a row AND two of those times were after I'd eaten. You know how some things look different on you after you've eaten? The skirt did look okay. Obvs, it didn't look brilliant or designer-y or anything nice. How could it, it's school uniform, duh? But, you know, it did look normal. Now it looks

like a blooming kilt, all bunched up and too much material-y. I can't face walking into the new school wearing this. I might as well wear a massive sign around my neck, like homeless people sometimes do, but instead of it saying:

PLEASE GIVE ME 50P
FOR A CUP OF TEA

mine would say,

HELLO,
I'M NEW HERE,
HAVE YOU NOTICED HOW ENORMOUS
I LOOK IN THIS HORRIBLE SKIRT?

The skirt makes me look super fat and I really, really, really don't want to start my new school as THE SUPER-FAT ONE. I know I'm not actually, in real life, SUPER FAT, like kids in documentaries who are so fat their parents send them away to be slimmed down by de-fatting experts in special camps, usually in America. The kids all live in wooden huts, crying

while they're made to eat lettuce by someone wearing shorts and shouting at them. Then later they sneak about in the dark plotting to get out and eat chocolate and hamburgers (not at the same time, obvs). But in this skirt, I actually do look THAT fat!

I am a bit fat, though, I s'pose. How could I forget? Mum is *always* going on about it, calling me her 'Roly-poly' and I know that's just another way of saying 'Fatty'. She thinks if she makes her snide remarks 'amusing' (they never are) then it doesn't count as badgering me. She says things like, 'Should you really be eating peanut butter and jam, my podgy little pudding?' and, 'Maybe push yourself away from the table, rather than drag yourself towards it, for a change, angel?' And her hilarious favourite, always said in that I'm-not-being-horrible-but-I've-just-noticed-this-interesting-thing voice, that makes me want to scream, 'Oh, by the way, my darling girl, have you heard – chocolate is fattening?'



Anyway, I can't think about Mum's pathetic, non-stop attempts to give me an eating disorder right now. I've got to work out what to do with the skirt. I've tried rolling it over a few times, but that makes the skirty bit stick right out like a ballet tutu. I've tried it on back-to-front and that's a bit better, but there are buttons down the front and they look a bit weird on the back. I just want no one to notice me.

Well, actually, that's not true – I mean, I don't want them to notice me for the wrong reasons and looking fat and stupid in my skirt is definitely the wrongest of reasons.

At least it's not a second-hand skirt. Mum seriously, not-even-trying-to-be-funny, suggested getting me a second-hand skirt from the school shop! She kept going on about how short we are of money now and because I always rolled the top of my last school skirt over, I was probably going to do the same thing with this one so no one would even know if it was second-hand or not, because by the time I'd rolled it over to make it short no one would know what it had originally been!

I told her I would literally kill myself and then never talk to her again ever if I had to wear a second-hand

skirt, and then she accused me of not caring about her situation and how awful it all was for her.

Typical Mum. Of course, she has no idea that I *do* know all about how she feels from reading her blog! But, you know, you'd think a Proper Mum might worry more about how her kids were doing and how they were coping instead of always talking about *her* feelings.

In the end Gran bought the skirt cos I think maybe Mum really doesn't have any money now.



It's a whole week since Mum, Luke and me left Ivy House for the last time ever – the house Luke and I were born and brought up in. I felt really sad but really excited too. Yay! We've moved in with Gran (Mum's mum). Okay, not so yay, but it's be great to be in London, near shops and cinemas, and I won't have to spend lots of time with my know-it-all, swotty-Horace, lame, ten-year-old brother Luke, just because

we live in the middle of nowhere and there's no one else around.

Anyway I didn't want to stay in Bankside Marsh, Middle-of-Nowhere-shire because we'd have had to move to a much smaller house but in the same village, and end up living near Dad but not with him any more. It would be so horrible, seeing our old house taken over by a new family who are probably all happy and fine and will stay there forever because they don't have a Drunk Dad who ruins everything, like we do.

And if we stayed I might see girls from my old school, Greyfriars Ladies' College, who all know that I had to leave because we can't afford the fees any more and they'd pity me. The shame would be unbearable – and anyway I didn't actually like Greyfriars. It was just filled with stupid, super-thin girls who are good at sports and get fake tans and watch *Made in Chelsea* and think I'm not as pretty as them.



On my last day of school all the girls gathered round, supposedly to say goodbye, but really they were being snooty and catty, saying things like, 'Oh my god, you're going to a comprehensive school, poor you, I *sooooo* totes could not do that,' and, 'I feel *sooooo* sorry for you, Tabitha, you won't get a proper education now, oh my god, maybe you'll end up working in a shop or something troooooooly dreadful like that.'

The worst was from that totally lame, not-nearly-as-gorgeous-as-she-thinks-she-is Olivia who said, 'You'll probably get some awful diseases from the other kids at a place like that.'

I could have killed them.

I'm nervous enough about starting a new school in the middle of the year. I don't need them all giving me their brilliant ideas about what happens at an 'ordinary' school as Miss Peak called it when she said goodbye. I won't catch diseases, will I?

I never really fitted in at Greyfriars. S'pose I didn't try to either. Our family was too poor and never 'quite right'. Most of the girls there came from families that owned big estates or huge farms or their dads worked for some big bank. They were all called things like

Pandora and Aurora and Plethora. Everyone knew we weren't really proper rich – we weren't, even before Dad lost what we did have.

Now Dad's going to live with his mum – Gran Baird or GB as we call her, which she does *not* like because, she says, it makes her sound like a country. (We started calling her GB when we were little, because she was so posh and different to Mum's mum, who was always just like an ordinary gran.)

It's really embarrassing – your dad living with his mum when he's forty-six years old. I'm not going to tell anyone at my new school that's where he lives . . . I'll say he works abroad or something.



Dad didn't even come to wave us off like he promised. Big surprise. Soooo unlike Dad not to do something he promised to do. Hah, hah. He sent me a text saying, *Please don't be cross with Daddy for not waving you all off. I couldn't, it would have made me too sad.* Hmm. Which means

he probably felt less sad in the pub.

When he says or texts things like that I feel like texting back, *Why shouldn't you be sad? I'm sad and it's all your fault,* but then I never do. I don't know why, I suppose there's no point and I sort of feel sorry for him too. I wish I didn't, because it *is* all his fault.



So, we've finally, actually, for-real moved into Gran's house. It smells a bit of cats, which is a bit random cos Gran doesn't have a cat. Gran has Basil, and he is so not a cat. He is Gran's dog but she thinks he's her son!

He's all right and doesn't smell. Not that Gran would mind if he did. She loves him so much he is allowed to do whatever he likes. Gran treats Basil the way GB treats Dad and the way Mum treats Luke – all spoilt boys!

Gran's given me the bedroom on the first floor by the bathroom. It's pretty great because I'm nowhere

near Mum or Luke. They're on the top floor, next to each other, of course, because Mum adores him and he's her favourite. How perfect for them that they're literally neighbours. Can you say neighbours when it's *inside* a house?

I feel a bit weird moving in here, though. I love Gran. She can be really funny and isn't like an old lady at all, but her house is much, much smaller than Ivy House and moving in here, it feels like we're letting the whole world know we're not doing very well.

When I have to tell people that I live with my mum AND gran (and brother, worse luck) it's definitely going to feel like I've got a T-shirt on, or something, which says *MY FAMILY ARE POOR*.

I don't suppose I have to tell people at my new school where we used to live or where I went to school. And it's not like we were super-rich – not like all those others girls at Greyfriars. Their houses were all so enormous they made even Ivy House look like a doll's house! I suppose, maybe, what I mean is, that it's all different now. Before, at least we looked more like a normal family . . . even if only, as it turned out, from the outside.

I hope not everyone at the new school lives with their mum and dad, all Happy Families and everything. Oh god, what if they're not that, but instead they're all obese, or living off benefits (I don't even know what 'off benefits' means) or drug-addicts with knives and they're infested with horrible infectious illnesses like everyone at Greyfriars is convinced they'll be.



I've decided I am not going to be an outsider at this place. I am going to fit in. No more, 'Ah, poor Tabitha, she doesn't have her own pony and her dad's an alcie'. Make way for, 'Hey, Tabitha . . . lovin' that —' Erm, can't think of anything super cool right now. '. . . you're rocking.' I am going to be Super-Five-Star ****** Popular at my new school for definite. Yup, that is what I'm going to be now.

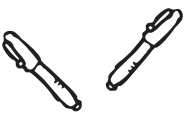


By the way, if I am happy and popular at this school, I hereby solemnly swear to do a Good Person Job when I'm older. You know, a job like a nurse, or a doctor, or a dental assistant – one of those yukky jobs where you have to deal with other people's gross things like boils and warts and stinky tongues. Jobs really caring, nice people do.





SUMMER TERM – MONDAY
FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL!!!!!



School was great! I LOVE IT!!!!! All right, I don't want to sound too keen or that it was the best day of my life or anything saddo like that, and obviously it's school so it's impossible to love, love, love it, but it was *soooooo* different from Greyfriars. Completely, totally, in every way different. For starters, there are boys there. Not that I'm interested in them. I don't even like them – pathetic losers – but it is very cool to be at a mixed school. So much cooler than that 'Ladies' College' Greyfriars liked to call itself!



I sorted the skirt by cutting off the waistband, so that it is less bulky. (Mum is literally going to kill me if she ever finds out.) I am a genius – it really worked. All the too-much-material-y bit was in the waistband it turned out. Anyway, I cut it off with Gran's patchwork-making scissors (they are sharp!), and I rolled the top of the skirt over, like I always did with the Greyfriars one, but then it kept slipping down – turns out the waistband is there to hold the skirt up. That must be why they put them on skirts and trousers – to stop them falling down. But, no prob, I got one of Luke's belts (Wrangler, just how uncool can he be?!) and put that on over the outside of skirt, leaving a bit of skirt over the top and then folded that bit down over and under the belt. It looked really cool that way.



It must have looked good because the first person to speak to me at Heathville Academy, which I've already found out everyone calls HAC (glad I learnt that on the first day) was this really pretty girl, A'isha. She came up to me and said, 'How do get your skirt to look all flat like that and not bunched up?'

I was so relieved. It was great someone actually started a conversation. I told her what I'd done and she was really impressed. A'isha was wearing a – don't know what they're called – plain, dark scarf thing over her head which completely covered her hair and was pinned together under her chin, so you could only see her face. There was a horrible moment when I just knew she was looking at me like I was looking at her and thinking her scarf thing was a bit weird. I wasn't actually thinking that at all, I'd just never seen a girl my age wearing one. There was not one even remotely not-completely-pink girl at Greyfriars. That's another great thing about HAC – there aren't just boys, there are so many different types of kids. Loads of girls wearing scarves like A'isha, too.

Luckily A'isha didn't take offence, she just said, 'It's called a hijab. My dad makes me wear it.' And then she

rolled her eyes and made a really funny what-a-loser face which made me laugh out loud.

Apparently her dad's a Muslim and is all serious about the hijab when she tries to go to out – to school or wherever – without it on, but doesn't mind that she wants to go to university and mixes with boys all day, which she said is a bit 'messed up'.

A'isha was really nice. I think she's one of the cool kids here because practically everyone who passed us while we were talking nodded at her and she nodded back, but without anyone saying anything. As far as I can tell, that's what they do here – just nod at each other. They don't do completely awks 'hellos' or anything, just a really tiny nod of the head. It's sooooo cool.

I think A'isha and I are going to be proper friends. I could die of gratitude. So, I've got one friend now, so just one (or maybe two?) more to get – fingers crossed.



When I got back, Mum had loads of questions. She used to go to Heathside Academy years ago, before it was an Academy, though. Whenever we visited Gran she always used to point in the direction of this huge glass and wood building – about ten times the size of Greyfriars – set back from the road, with a strip of scrappy, faded grass in front of it, and remind us she went there.

In fact, as I left this morning she said, 'Hope they don't remember me, or you've got no chance!'

I didn't bother to tell her that as she was there a trillion years ago and not married at the time, her name would have been different. So no one there is going to realise I'm her daughter and I am certainly not about to mention it! And anyway Mum is absolutely ancient – forty-one years old! All her teachers will have been dead for years. As long as I've got anything to do with it, Mum isn't even going to set foot in my new school, no thank you. I'm not having her telling teachers, or worse, other parents, about her marriage break up and that embarrassing 'healing-process' blog she's started where she blabs on and on about it all.