



# NICCI FRENCH

# BENEATH THE SKIN

'Truly chilling . . . does not miss a beat as it courses towards its startling denouement'

DAILY MAIL

# Beneath the Skin

Nicci French



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To Katie and Chris

*In the summer, their bodies catch heat. Heat seeps in through the pores on their bare flesh; hot light enters their darkness; I imagine it rippling round inside them, stirring them up. Dark shining liquid under the skin. They take off their clothes, all the thick, closed layers that they wear in winter, and let the sun touch them: on the arms, on the back of the neck. It pours down between their breasts, and they tip back their heads to catch it on their faces. They close their eyes, open their mouths; painted mouths or naked ones. Heat throbs on the pavements where they walk, with bare legs opening, light skirts fluttering to the rhythm of their stride. Women. In the summer, I watch them, I smell them, and I remember them.*

*They look at their reflections in shop windows, sucking in their stomachs, standing straighter, and I look at them. I watch them watching themselves. I see them when they think they are invisible.*

*The ginger one in an orange sundress. One of the straps is twisted on her shoulder. She has freckles on her nose; a large freckle on her collarbone. No bra. When she walks, she swings her pale, downy arms, and her nipples show through the tightened cotton of her dress. Shallow breasts. Sharp pelvic bones. She wears flat sandals. Her second toe is longer than the big one. Muddy green eyes, like the bottom of a river. Pale eyelashes; blinking too much. Thin mouth; a trace of lipstick left at the corners. She hunches under the heat; lifts up one arm to wipe the beads of moisture from her forehead and there is a graze of ginger stubble in the scoop of her armpit, maybe a few days old. Legs prickly too; they would feel like damp sandpaper. Her skin is going blotchy; her hair is sticking to her brow. She hates the heat, this one, is defeated by it.*

*The one with big breasts, a squashy tummy and masses of dark hair, you'd think that she'd suffer more – all that weight, that flesh. But she lets the sun in, she doesn't fight it. I see her, opening out her big soft body. Circles of sweat under her arms, on her green T-shirt, sweat running down her neck, past the thick, straight braids of her hair. Sweat glistening in the dark hairs on her arms, her strong legs in their high shoes. Her underarm hair is thick; I know the rest of her body when I see it. She has dark hairs on her upper lip, a mouth that is red, wet, like a ripe plum. She eats a roll that is wrapped in brown, waxy paper with grease spots on it, sinking white teeth into the pulp. A tomato pip is caught on her upper lip, grease oozes down her chin and she doesn't wipe it away. Her skirt catches in the crease between her buttock, rides up a bit.*

*The heat can make women disgusting. Some of them get all dried up, like insects in the desert. Dry lines on their faces, stitching their upper lips, criss-crossing under their eyes. The sun has sucked away all their moisture. Especially the older women, who try to hide their crêpey arms under long sleeves, their faces under hats. Other women get rank, rotten; their skin can barely contain their disintegration. When they come near, I can smell them: under the deodorant and soap and the perfume they've dabbed on their wrists and behind their ears, I can smell the odour of ripeness and decay.*

*But some of them open like flowers in the sunlight; clean and fresh and smooth-skinned; hair like silk, pulled back, or falling round their faces. I sit on a bench in the park and look at them as they walk past, singly or in groups, pressing their hot feet into the bleached grass. The light glistens on them. The black one in a yellow dress and the sun bouncing off the shining planes of her skin; rich, greasy hair. I hear her laugh as she passes, a gravelly sound that seems to come from a secret place deep inside her strong body. I look at what lies in the shadows: the crease in the armpit, the hollow behind the knee, the dark place between their breasts. The hidden bits of them. They think no one is looking.*

*Sometimes I can see what they are wearing underneath. The woman with a sleeveless white shirt and the bra strap that keeps slipping on*

to her shoulder. It is grey-coloured, stained by wear. She put on a clean shirt but didn't bother about her bra. She thought no one would notice. I notice these things. The slip under the hem. The chipped nail varnish. The spot they try to cover with makeup. The button that doesn't match. The smudge of dirt, the grimy rim of the collar. The ring that's got too tight with years, so the finger swells around it.

They walk past me. I see them through a window, when they think they're alone. The one who is sleeping, in the afternoon, in her kitchen, in the house down the quiet street I sometimes visit. Her head hangs at an awkward angle – in a minute she will jerk awake, wonder where she is – and her mouth is slack and open. There is a thin line of spittle on her cheek, like a snail's trail.

Getting in a car, the dress hitched up, a flash of underwear. Dimpled thighs.

The love bite under the carefully arranged scarf.

Pregnant, and I can see the tummy button through the thin material of the dress.

With a baby, and there are milk stains on the blouse, a tiny patch of vomit where the baby's head lolls on her shoulder.

The smile that shows the swollen, receding gums; the chipped front tooth; the porcelain cap.

The track of brown down the parting in the blonde hair, where the dye is growing out.

The thick, yellowing toenails that betray her age.

The first sign of varicose veins on the white leg, like a purple worm under the skin.

In the park, they are lying on the grass while the sun beats down on them. They sit outside pubs, froth from the head of beer on their lips. Sometimes I stand among them in the underground; the press of hot flesh in the stale air. Sometimes I sit beside them, my thigh just touching theirs. Sometimes I open a door for them, and follow them into the cool interior of a library, a gallery, a shop, watching the way they walk, the way they turn their heads or push their hair behind their ears. The way they smile and look away. Sometimes they do not look away.

For a few weeks more, it is summer in the city.





# Part One

*Zoë*



## One

I wouldn't have become famous if it hadn't been for the watermelon. And I wouldn't have been in possession of the watermelon if it hadn't been for the heat. So I'd better start with the heat.

It was hot. But that may give you the wrong impression. It may make you think of the Mediterranean and deserted beaches and long drinks with colourful paper parasols dangling out of them. Nothing like that. The heat was like a big old fat smelly mangy greasy farty dying dog that had settled down on London at the beginning of June and hadn't moved for three horrible weeks. It had got sweatier and slimier and the sky had changed day by day from blue to a sort of industrial mixture of yellow and grey. Holloway Road now felt like a giant exhaust pipe, the car fumes held down at street level by a weight of even more harmful pollutants somewhere above. We pedestrians would cough at each other like beagles released from a tobacco laboratory. At the beginning of June it had felt good to put on a summer dress and feel it light against my skin. But my dresses were grimy and stained by the end of each day and I had to wash my hair in the sink every morning.

Normally the choice of books that I read to my class is dictated according to fascist totalitarian principles imposed by the government, but this morning I'd rebelled just for once and read them a Brer Rabbit story I'd found in a cardboard box of battered childhood books when I'd cleared out my dad's flat. I'd lingered over old school reports, letters written before I'd been born, tacky china ornaments that brought with them a flood of sentimental memories. I kept all the books because I thought one day I might

have children myself, and then I could read them the books that Mum had read to me before she died and left it to Dad to tuck me up in bed each night, and reading aloud became just another of those things that were lost, and so in my memory became something precious and wonderful. Whenever I read aloud to kids, there's a bit of me that feels as if I've turned into a soft, blurred version of my mother; that I'm reading to the child I once was.

I wish I could say that the class was held enthralled by this classic old-fashioned piece of storytelling. Maybe there was just a bit less wailing, nose-picking, staring at the ceiling, or nudging than usual. But what mainly emerged as I asked them about the story afterwards was that nobody knew what a watermelon was. I drew one on the blackboard for them with red and green chalk. A watermelon is so like a cartoon anyway that even I can draw them. A complete blank.

So I said that if they were good – and for the last hour of the afternoon they were alarmingly well behaved – I'd bring in a watermelon for them the next day. On the way home I got off the bus a stop later than usual, after it had turned up Seven Sisters Road. I walked back down the road past the greengrocers and stalls. In the very first stall, stacked high with fruit, I bought a pound of golden nap cherries and ate them greedily. They were tart, juicy, clean; they made me think of being in the countryside where I grew up, of sitting under the green shade as the sun goes down. It was just after five o'clock, so the traffic was already starting to grind to a halt. The fumes were hot against my face, but I was feeling almost cheerful. I was fighting my way through crowds of people as usual, but many of them seemed in good spirits. They were wearing bright colours. My urban claustrophobia meter was down from its usual eleven to a more manageable six or seven or so.

I bought a watermelon the size of a basketball and the weight of a bowling ball. The man needed four carrier-bags one inside the other and there was virtually no practical way of carrying it.

Very gingerly I swung the bag over my shoulder, almost spinning myself into the traffic as I did so, and carried the melon like a man with a sack of coal on his back. It was only about three hundred yards to the flat. I'd probably make it.

As I crossed Seven Sisters Road and turned into Holloway Road, people stared at me. God knows what they thought I was up to, a skimpily dressed young blonde hunched over and carrying what must have looked like her own weight in iron ore in a shopping bag.

Then it happened. What did it feel like at the time? It was a moment, an impulse, a blow, and then it was in the past. I only really reconstructed what had taken place through the action replays in my mind, by telling people about it, by what people told *me* about it. A bus was coming towards me on the inside lane of the road. It had almost reached me when a person jumped off the platform at the back. It was going as close to full speed as anything ever gets in Holloway Road during the rush-hour. Normal people don't jump off buses like that, even Londoners, so at first I thought he might have been recklessly crossing the road behind the bus. It was the speed at which he hit the pavement, almost losing his balance, that showed he must have come off the bus.

Then I saw there were two of them, apparently joined together by straps. The one behind was a woman, older than him. But not really old. She really did lose her footing, horribly, when she hit the ground, and rolled over. I saw her feet crazily high in the air and she crashed against a bin. I saw her head hit the pavement; I heard it. The man wrenched himself free. He was holding a bag. Her bag. He held it in two hands, chest high. Somebody shouted. He ran away at full speed. He had a strange, tight smile on his face and his eyes were glassy. He was running straight for me, so I had to step out of the way. But I didn't just step out of the way. I let the watermelon slip off my shoulder. I leaned back and swung it. I had to lean back or else it would have fallen vertically, taking me down with it. If it had continued on its circular progress around me I would quickly have lost control of

it, but its progress was suddenly halted as it hit the man full in the stomach.

They talk about the sweet spot. When I used to play rounders at primary school, and I swung at the ball, mostly it would hit the edge of the bat and dribble off pathetically to the side. But every so often, the ball would hit the right place and, with almost no effort, it would just fly. Cricket bats have a sweet spot too, except that it's called the 'meat'. And tennis rackets have sweet spots. So do baseball bats. And this bag-snatcher caught my watermelon right in its sweet spot, right at the perfect point of its arc. There was the most amazing thud as it struck him in the stomach. There was a whoosh of ejecting air and he just went down as drastically as if there was no body inside his clothes and they were attempting to fold themselves up on the pavement. He didn't go down like a falling tree. He went like a tall building being demolished by explosives around the base. One minute it's there and then there's just dust and rubble.

I hadn't made any plan of what to do next if the man was going to get up and come at me. My watermelon was only good for one shot. But he wasn't able to get up. He clawed at the pavement a bit, and then we were all surrounded by a crowd. I couldn't see him any longer, and I remembered the woman. Some people got in my way, tried to talk to me, but I pushed my way past them. I was light-headed, exhilarated. I felt like laughing or talking wildly. But there was nothing funny about the woman. She was slumped and twisted on the pavement, her face down. There was quite a lot of blood on the stone, very dark and thick. I thought she must be dead but there were odd twitches from her leg. She was smartly dressed, a business suit with quite a short grey skirt. Suddenly I thought of her having breakfast this morning and going to work, then heading home thinking of what she was going to do this evening, making mundane and comforting plans for herself, and this suddenly happening and her life being changed. Why hadn't she just let go of the stupid bag? Maybe it had been caught round her arm.

People were standing around her looking uncomfortable. We all wanted somebody official – a doctor or a policeman or anybody in a uniform – to step forward and take charge and make this a regular event that was being dealt with through proper channels. But there was nobody.

‘Is there a doctor?’ an old woman next to me said.

Oh, fuck. I’d done a two-day first-aid course in the second term of my teacher-training. I stepped forward and knelt down next to her. I could sense an air of reassurance around me. I knew about administering medicines to toddlers but I couldn’t think of anything relevant here except for one of the key maxims: ‘When in doubt, do nothing.’ She was unconscious. There was lots of blood around the face and mouth. Another phrase came into my mind. ‘The recovery position.’ As gently as I could, I turned her face towards me. There were gasps and expressions of disgust from behind me.

‘Has anybody called an ambulance?’ I said.

‘I done it on my mobile,’ a voice said.

I took a deep breath and pushed my fingers into the woman’s mouth. She had red hair and very pale skin. She was younger than I’d thought at first, and probably rather beautiful. I wondered what colour her eyes were, behind the closed lids. Perhaps she had green eyes: red hair and green eyes. I scooped thick blood out of her mouth. I looked at my red hand and saw a tooth or a bit of a tooth. A groan came from somewhere inside her. There was a cough. A good sign, probably. Very loud and close by I heard a siren. I looked up. I was pushed aside by a man in uniform. Fine by me.

With my left hand I found a tissue in my pocket and carefully wiped the blood and other stuff off my fingers. My melon. I didn’t have my melon. I wandered back in search of it. The man was sitting up now, with two police officers, a man and a woman, looking down at him. I saw my blue plastic bag.

‘Mine,’ I said, picking it up. ‘I dropped it.’

‘She did it,’ a voice said. ‘She stopped him.’

'Fucking KO'd him,' someone else said, and close by a woman laughed.

The man stared up at me. Maybe I expected him to look vengeful but he just seemed blankly puzzled.

'That right?' said the WPC, looking a bit suspicious.

'Yeah,' I said warily. 'But I'd better be getting on.'

The male police officer stepped forward. 'We'll need some details, my darling.'

'What do you want to know?'

He took out a notebook. 'We'll start with your name and address.'

That was another funny thing. I turned out to be more shocked than I realized. I could remember my name, though even that was a bit of an effort. But I just couldn't think of my address, even though I own the bloody place and I've been living there for eighteen months. I had to get my diary out of my pocket and read the address out to them, with my hand trembling so much I could hardly make the words out. They must have thought I was mad.



## Two

I had reached E in the register: E for Damian Everatt, a skinny little boy with huge spectacles taped together at one hinge, waxy ears, an anxious, gappy mouth, and scabby knees from where the other boys pushed him over in the playground.

‘Yes, Miss,’ he whispered, as Pauline Douglas pushed her head round the already open classroom door.

‘Can I have a quick word, Zoë?’ she said. I stood up, smoothing my dress anxiously, and joined her. There was a welcome through-breeze in the corridor, though I noticed that a bead of sweat was trickling down Pauline’s carefully powdered face, and her normally crisp greying hair was damp at her temples. ‘I’ve had a call from a journalist on the *Gazette*.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A local paper. They want to talk to you about your heroics.’

‘What? Oh, that. It’s –’

‘There was mention of a melon.’

‘Ah, yes, well, you see –’

‘They want to send a photographer, too. Quiet!’ This last to the circle of children fidgeting on the floor behind us.

‘I’m sorry they bothered you. Just tell them to go away.’

‘Not at all,’ Pauline said firmly. ‘I’ve arranged for them to come round at ten forty-five, during break-time.’

‘Are you sure?’ I looked at her dubiously.

‘It might be good publicity.’ She looked over my shoulder. ‘Is that it?’

I looked round at the huge green-striped fruit, innocent on the shelf behind us.