# TLC Showcase

## ELLIOT SWEENEY




TLC The Literary Consultancy

Literary Values in a Digital Age

# Introduction to Brown Eyed Girl

According to the Mental Health Foundation, suicide remains the leading cause of death for men under 50 and for both young men and women aged between 20-34. These sobering statistics anchor my debut novel, 'Brown Eyed Girl', the first in an intended crime series.

When the suicide of a troubled young woman eerily re-enacts the death of his daughter five years prior, the circumstances are too close to the bone for troubled ex-copper Kasper. The fluke survival of his own suicide bid has caused a profound psychic change, leading him to ditch his former life and associations and help others using his unique brand of strength and sensitivity. So begins Kasper's investigation into the realms of vice, blackmail, and entrenched familial denial as he seeks redemption, not only for the young woman, but also for himself.

As a psychiatric nurse, the themes and contexts used in 'Brown Eyed Girl' mark familiar ground. I wanted to write contemporary noir of a vein similar to the books of Chandler and Hammett I have always enjoyed; but the project was also a way to explore serious and timely issues of professional interest. Indeed, Kasper is very much based upon patients I've encountered in my day job, some of whom are now sadly missed.

My experience with the TLC came through the 'Free Reads' scheme which I applied for upon completion of a seventy-thousand word manuscript of this project. I was paired with polymath Northern-Irish writer Claire McGowan, who came back with a supportive yet challenging report. I was reassured of the novel's promise, and was given specific elements to consider. It was clear Claire had absorbed the story rather than skim-read, and I found her critique showed great empathy for what the book was trying to say.

Claire also gave me invaluable formatting tips (dialogue, font, sizing, etc), an area which I struggle around. This enabled me to make the work 'look' more prose-like, which in turn has boosted my confidence no-end.

'Brown Eyed Girl' is now in its third draft, and is more bouyant and punchy than ever. Since 'Free Reads', I've had two short stories accepted for publication, and more recently, to my immense shock, have been offered a scholarship with Curtis Browne Creative to work on the novel through a prestigious course. Without doubt, none of these would have come about were it not for the TLC.

# Brown Eyed Girl by Elliot Sweeney

**Chapter 1**

The day it happened was a black day.

I'd had a good run of late, but still get them sometimes. I've learnt to take action otherwise the malaise will fester, so spent an hour running interval laps in Finsbury Park until my ears popped, then jogged to Savages Boxing Club where I bludgeoned the heavy bag until my shoulders were as bereft the rest of me.

Afterwards, I cycled to a city farm in Highbury. The place was owned by a local charity and staffed by volunteers with learning difficulties. It smelled of hay and dung and was punctuated with bleats and the high-pitched rattles of cages.

I used to come here with my daughter Rosie. I'd lift her above the gates and let her stroke the goats and donkeys through the bars. I still remember the sound of her laugh as they licked her tiny hands.

The place has a small café. A pretty girl with Down's Syndrome served me a pot of tea which I drank along with two Sertralines popped from a strip. I had no desire to eat.

Depression, to give it a name, is often characterised as a state of profound melancholy; but for me, its presence is less conspicuous. It arrives insidiously, a gnawing sense of futility, where nothing means anything, matters to anyone, and no one can tell you different. That's just how it is. So sod it.

Sometime in the afternoon, I cycled to the off license for a half bottle of Bushmills, and from there to my allotment at the rear of Lordship Rec. Broadwater Farm loomed behind me, the ziggurats of the estate black against the sun. I in the hut doorway and drank whiskey from a teacup. Muslim mums in hijabs power-walked laps by the football cage; behind them, a couple of Vietnamese pensioners held Tai-Chi poses on the yellowing Spring grass. Before long, my mouth was warm and peaty, my senses blunted from the booze.

I reached inside the hut for my old Nokia and glanced past the windowsill where my father's ashes waited in a terracotta urn. I'd left the phone off all day, not in the mood to talk to anyone. But somewhere along the way I decided to check my messages. I didn't think the day could get much meaner, but was about to be proven wrong. My

chest tightened when I saw four missed calls from Harriet Berkowitz, who I was due to meet the following night.

I hit answerphone. Hairs on my nape prickled when her strained voice spoke:

'Kasper? I need help. Everything's a mess. I'm in trouble. I don't know what to do. Oh God... Kasper. You're my friend. Please ring when you get this. Please, Kasper...'

There was crying, and the message cut dead. It was left at eight-seventeen. Seven hours ago. I tried calling back and went straight to voicemail. Three more attempts, and on the final one I said, 'It's Kasper. Call me.'

I listened twice more in case I'd missed anything. I hadn't. She said the same thing each time. By four, I'd lost count of the number of times I'd tried calling Harriet. I paced the allotment, looking around, my thoughts rattling around without focus.

Eventually, I decided to ring Detective Inspector Diane McAteer, my ex-girlfriend and one of the few acquaintances I still had in the Met. Skipping pleasantries, I said: 'Diane? There's a girl I met. She's pretty screwed up. Name's Harriet Berkowitz. She left me a voice message. She sounded scared, Diane. Like she was about to do something. Now I can't reach her. You heard anything?'

'Nope,' she said, 'and telling you would be a breach of police confidentiality, Kas.'

'I know that. Wouldn't ask if I wasn't worried.'

A pause. 'Let me make a few calls, see if there's been any missing persons. If I get a bite, I'll buzz you.'

'Thanks, Diane.'

I was about to ring Harriet's father, but he beat me to it. Saul Berkowitz's voice was breathless, as if he had been running. He jumped straight to it, said, 'I can't reach Harry. I'm worried, Kasper.'

'Me too,' I said, and then I was running. 'On my way.'

I arrived to find Saul waiting for me in the doorway of his house. He was dressed in chinos and a tartan shirt that jarred with the chalky colour of his face. He ushered me inside and locked the door. The hall was festooned with papers and documents

– bank statements, academic notes and the like. The large grandfather clock by the staircase ticked.

We stopped in his kitchen and looked at each other. If he smelled the booze on me, he didn't let on. I told him about the answerphone message I'd received and played it back on loudspeaker. His face strained at the sound of his daughter's pleading. That took less than a minute. He told me she hadn't come home last night and neither he or her step-brother Toby had been able to reach her. That took another minute. After that, we just stood there. The grandfather clock kept ticking. Eventually, I said, 'Have you been into her bedroom?'

'No. She locks the door.'

'You got the key?'

'No.'

'Shall I break the lock?'

'Certainly not.'

I thought. 'Where's her step-brother?'

'Toby? Where do you think? Out looking for her.'

I nodded.

'What can we do now, Kasper?'

I turned to the garden. 'Wait,' I said.

I took a seat at the kitchen table, put my phone beside me, and had a sip from my hipflask. I looked at the eucalyptus at the head of the lawn.

Saul paced the floor behind. I could see his reflection in the window. He kept looking at things – the rug, the sink, a pile of books and opened envelopes – until eventually, he gave up and slumped next to me.

Diane's call came just before eight: 'Kas?'

'Yeah.'

'You with the Dad now?'

'Yeah.'

He was fixated on my mouth, his eyes like a lip-reader's, unblinking. 'Listen. There's been a person under a train, Kas. Young woman. Archway station.'

A hole blew open in my chest and expanded with each kick of my heart. I carefully removed the phone from one ear, put it to the other, both hands shaking suddenly. 'We're coming,' I said.

That short drive to Archway Station was one of the longest journeys I care to remember. Saul took us us in his rusty white Renault. Its roof-rack rattled like pelting stones the closer we got.

He said nothing the entire journey. Neither did I. His eyes stayed rooted ahead, knuckles white on the steering wheel. I had told him what Diane said. I think that was enough to know. I think we both knew.

We arrived at a scene of flashing blue lights, a huddle of bystanders, uniformed tube staff, police, an unmarked black van I recognised as a mortuary vehicle and an ambulance. As I stepped from the car, I was hit by a sharp wind that dried my eyes.

Saul was already talking to a paramedic who shrugged and pointed in the direction of the station. Yellow tape cordoning its entrance, blowing like awning in a storm. Police stood around. All seemed busy, but doing little. The station shutters were down, train staff standing outside, talking covertly, several smoking.

I saw Diane behind a red police Fiat. She was writing things down using the bonnet as a rest, her D.I. badge pinned to a neat blazer. Facing her with his back to me was a portly male in a pink shirt with curly locks of hair. When I drew close, I recognized him as Toby Berkowitz, Harriet's half-brother. She had showed me his picture only yesterday.

I walked over. Two teenage girls were talking animatedly as I passed. I caught the tail end of their conversation as one said to the other, 'Girl went splat,' and brought her two hands together with a clap. I swallowed down a sick taste and moved on.

Diane saw me and stopped writing. Toby looked up, his hair blowing wildly. Tinted aviators hid his eyes, and his cheeks puffy and red. He gestured passed me to where his father was. 'Daddy!' he said, and rushed towards Saul.

I ignored him, walked over, rested my arms on the Fiat bonnet and looked at Diane.

I hadn't been this close to her in a long time, but it still felt familiar. 'You think it's her?' I said.

She pursed her lips, nodded. 'The brother gave me a description of her clothes. They match.'

'She jumped?'

'Uh-huh. I've seen the CCTV. She was pacing the platform for ten minutes.'

'Where's she now?'

'Mortuary staff are down there with her. I gather it was bad.'

I looked around. The sky was blotched with mushroom clouds and seemed to be darkening with each passing moment. To Diane's right was a kebab shop beneath which a black male in a TFL uniform stood rigid. His face was taunt and ashen, and his eyes bore a transfixed stare, as if her were watching something infinitesimal.

'Who's he?' I said.

'The train driver. He's pretty shook up.'

I nodded, put a hand on her arm. 'Thanks, Diane,' I said, and wondered over to the driver. He was chugging on a badly rolled cigarette and coughed out a cloud of smoke. His eyes grew big as I came up close. 'Hello,' I said.

'Who're you, man? I already talked to the police.' He had a London voice mixed up with a twang of something Caribbean.

'I'm not police,' I said.

'Then what do you want?'

'I knew the girl.'

He gulped. His Adam's apple was large, lips flaked and dry. He took another pull on the smoke. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

'It's not your fault.'

'I can see her face...'

'I know.'

He stared ahead. His pupils were tiny in the vast whites of his eyes.

'It'll get easier,' I said. 'You may not believe that right now. But it will.'

'It don't make no sense. Why'd a young girl do something like that?'

I had no answer.

'You're not her Dad?'

'No,' I said. 'I was her... *friend*.'

I offered him my hand to shake. He took it, looked at me, held my stare. His palm trembled in mine.

In that stilted moment, my mind ran through the whole chain of events that led me to be stood outside this particular train station on this particular night, waiting for the body of a nineteen year-old girl called Harriet Berkowitz to be stretchered out.

# About the Writer

Elliot Sweeney wrote his first story when he was six. 'The Car' was an existential piece of urban noir, complete with a murder, a mercurial child detective, and an explosive traffic collision as its climax. He was delighted when his school laminated this minimalist work and shared it for public consumption in the infant library. From this auspicious start, his dream was always to be a writer: alas, as he grew, such aspirations were suppressed by the pressure to get a 'real job', and 'The Car' remained without follow-up for thirty years.

Most of his teens and twenties were spent in a head-spin, travelling or unemployed, then working as a barman, a carer, a kitchen assistant, unemployed again, and latterly, training to be a psychiatric nurse. All this time, he read voraciously, with a predilection for crime, and as he entered his thirties, the idea to write returned with gnawing urgency.

With his six year-old self's enthusiasm, he set about writing one thousand words each day. At five-thirty, he rose and he wrote, not stopping until the job was done. These fledgling results were clunky and should never be read. However, after a year, Elliot realised one thing - he had the self-determination to create a body of work.

Over time, he has retained his commitment, and this body has grown. Crime fiction seems to be his genre of choice, and serendipitously, his chosen profession gives him privileged access to the strange and dark frailties of the human mind.