

TLC Showcase

TIA WILLIAMS

*Winner of the Rowan Hisayo Buchanan
15,000 word extract competition*

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Introduction to 'Spun from Stars'

Spun from Stars began as a short story. In fact, it was the first short story I had ever completed. I'd spent many years playing with themes, characters and plot ideas, but following my own experience with feelings of detachment I knew that I wanted to write about mental illness. For my 22nd birthday I was gifted a short story workshop, and it was here that Tabitha was born. When I wrote the final sentence, I knew that Tabitha's story wasn't over, and decided to turn the short story into my first novel. Spun from Stars can be described as a work of fiction that explores melancholia with a touch of magic – what I believe is an apt reflection of navigating a mental illness.

I'd heard about the fantastic services offered by The Literary Consultancy before I decided to apply for the Rowan Hisayo Buchanan competition, and was inspired by the fact that the opportunity was aimed at writers with manuscripts in progress. I'd written a pivotal scene in my novel, one in which Tabitha's fears and anxieties come to a head. To me, this scene offered a snapshot of my character and the story that she inhabits, so I decided to submit it to The Literary Consultancy. Writing can be such a solitary and personal discipline that it is often difficult to expect others to react positively to your work, so I was overjoyed when I heard that I'd been selected as the winner! I am 23, and to be given such a wonderful opportunity so early in my career is brilliant motivation. As an unpublished writer, publication can often feel like an unattainable pipe dream, and it is recognition such as this that provides much needed encouragement.

The showcase you're reading is an excerpt from the beginning of my novel, and offers a glimpse into Tabitha's thought processes and the relationships she has formed with those around her. Her story deals primarily with her inability to separate fact from fiction., her often ill-fated attempts to deal with her condition through therapy, and the affairs she has with toxic men. These affairs result in an unexpected pregnancy, and impending motherhood forces Tabitha to assess the way she feels about her own parents – a father who struggles to understand her, and an absent mother who abandoned her in infancy. I love exploring how the pain of the past and fear of the future work in tandem to create a character who wrestles with her day to day existence. I set out to write something lyrical that would capture feelings of depression and desire, feelings that are so complex even though we all

encounter them. The result is a manuscript in progress that I am very proud of, and will continue to develop with the help of The Literary Consultancy. I hope that one day readers can enjoy Tabitha's full story.

An extract from 'Spun from Stars' by Tia Williams

At some point my legs must have opened and closed, like a book, and so my story was written.

It was difficult, to be comfortably naked. I couldn't relate to what seemed like a hulking mass of skin and bone, clay before it had been formed. I'd come to see it through the eyes of others – the collapsed shell sat opposite the doctor week by week, the detached figure bristling with sexual energy before whoever had taken it home that evening. There seemed to be nothing in between. No neutral space in which the body, *my* body, could hang out to dry. But now I was determined to see it for myself, for what it was and what it was not.

I stared intently at my reflection, unsure of what I was trying to do. Or, I was entirely sure of what I was trying to do, I just didn't know how I was going to do it. I felt as though I were waiting for an epiphany, some magical light to illuminate me from the inside out and reveal everything. But there was hardly anything to reveal. Wiry limbs, a spool of tawny hair, pellucid veins, barely visible. The looking seemed voyeuristic, unnatural. I heard a knock on the door and snatched my bathrobe from its hook.

"Not now. Later."

I stood for a minute, looping the belt of the robe around my waist and fastening it tightly, listening as the footsteps sloped away and a door slammed shut somewhere in the distance. I walked towards the mirror and pried the dog-eared photograph loose from the corner of the wooden frame: my mother in one of many old pictures I had of her. It was one of the earliest I had of her, she may even have been younger than I was. Before she'd met my father, certainly. A spindly girl, her body angular but feminine. She had on a lilac sundress, dotted with clusters of flowers. I tried to imagine what her body might have looked like beneath the dress, wondered if it had been anything like mine. I could see that it was slightly too tight for her, straining over her hips. She'd let the straps down, but they'd made hollows in her shoulders already. She seemed at ease, ripe and radiant for the camera. Father had said he didn't know much about this particular photograph – it was one he didn't see himself until after she'd gone. He assumed it wasn't taken long before he met her, says she used to wear the very same dress in the summer from time to time before she became

pregnant. Tells me the straps never did stop cutting those ridges into her shoulders.

I grieved her, silently lamenting the hands that would never clasp mine, her innocent face that would have meant home to me. I wondered how she'd have changed, how I'd have changed her. In other ways, I revelled in her absence, knowing her love for me had remained pure, the sort of immutable, organic love a mother feels for her silent child. Perhaps by now I'd have muddied that love, soiled what was between us with my stormy tempers and erratic behaviour. I hoped not. I liked to imagine that with her presence, everything else would have fallen into place.

"Tabitha?" He was back, tapping against the door, his voice heavy and close. "You haven't eaten a thing."

"I know. Don't come in." I crossed the room to lean against the door. "I'm going to wander around outside and find something to eat. I don't want to be indoors anymore." I could almost feel his shoulders slump. The way his entire body deflated when he felt dejected and I'd punctured his leonine pride. His voice came back thin and monotonous.

"Alright. Wear a coat."

He was wounded because he knew I had no plan. No real aim other than to be away from the house, *his* house. Away from him. There was a park bench that I liked to sit on when the world had spread itself across me too thickly, somewhere I could watch people come and go and make imaginary connections between them, safe in the knowledge that I didn't have to engage with them at all. But everything had crystallised beneath a heavy veil of snow overnight, so I decided that it'd have to be the bookshop.

Just a week before the year had turned, and with it my stomach. A new year, the same old ritual of bringing it in. Squeals of uncensored anticipation, the cacophony of empty beer bottles being smashed against the street, that perfect knot of silence as two pairs of lips sought one another out through the revelry. But nobody had sought me out. There was no revelry for me, no anticipation, just the fragmented onslaught of pictures, words. Snatches of a conversation, shards of memories, synesthetic splinters that I couldn't quite connect. And then, one solitary, singular moment. The point at which we herald in a new year, fertile with the possibility of fresh starts and new beginnings, when promises and hopes and ambitions are resuscitated and

reimagined. I'd felt devoid of imagination.

But now I was imagining Richard. I dressed quickly, in case father decided to come in unannounced, and made my way out of the door and downstairs to the main entrance of the block, passing three doors as I went. Mrs Davie's door – she'd hung a wreath. Past the door of the new couple who kept their pram on the stairway landing, and past the third door. I didn't know who lived behind that door. Perhaps somebody very quiet. Perhaps nobody at all.

Feet first. I supposed that would be the way to do it, the way that made the most sense. I could visualise myself curling my fingers around the handle of the bookshop's door, pulling down and pushing out, stepping inside and feeling the familiar roughness of the mat beneath my feet. I'd done it countless times before – the steps were etched somewhere on my memory – I just couldn't imagine getting myself there, making the journey between one door and the other. I'd made it this far, through my bedroom and into the hallway, out through the door and down the communal halls that seemed labyrinthine on days like this, and stood before the main door watching shadowy figures flit to and fro through the frosted glass. I took my gloves from where they were balled tightly in my pocket and counted as I pushed my fingers through theirs...*one...two...three...four...five...*and almost at once, the building expelled me and I was stood on the outskirts of the crowd, watching.

Each figure had been made indistinct by the various hats and scarves and thick winter coats in muted tones, a sepia patchwork of cotton and wool and tweed. They'd cocooned, retreated into their fabric houses to enjoy the slow simmer of warmth and anonymity. They were alone, for the most part, but occasionally moved in pairs, disrupting the steady flow of traffic. Couples with arms interwoven wound leisurely through the throng, a mother, face glowing from the frost as a small figure bound in wool trailed behind her. I slipped in behind a squat man wearing a black felt hat, and it was the red feather tucked into his hatband that I trained my eyes on as together we crossed the street and crunched uniformly through the snow and around the corner.

It was easier not to think about the journey. To focus on whatever I could – the hat's iridescent feather, or a set of traffic lights ahead, or my own feet. They became my anchors, small things that gave me something to look at while my feet made the steps and turns that'd lead me to the bookshop. If the anchor disappeared or hid

from me I'd hone in on something else, and form a thread that marked my path until I was there – fingers on the handle, swinging the door open. My feet were planted firmly on the mat, and it was a small victory. I took a brief pause, back turned away from the shelves, and took long sips of the smell of wood, of coffee, extra hot to ward off the cold, of the layers of damp clothes and damp hair. It was funny how quickly the smell of a place could become familiar, but not this place. It caught me by surprise every time, and every time I wished I could spend a little longer with it while it was still new.

It was busy today. A respite from the cold, a comfortable wood and leather clad nook away from the harsh winter. On the far side of the room people sat in tight, conspiratorial covens over steaming mugs, stealing gossip and sharing body heat. They'd shed their thick pelts and laughed now, free and thawed. I found an empty table, pulling a book from one of the shelves on the way. Richard wouldn't mind. Usually people weren't allowed to take books into the café unless they'd bought them, but he made allowances for me. Sometimes he gave them to me, if he'd noticed me with one a few times. He'd wrap them in brown paper and tuck notes somewhere between the pages so that he could catch me out.

"Have you gotten to the third chapter, yet?" he'd ask. I'd usually say yes because I wouldn't like to disappoint him. But if I was lying he'd raise his eyebrows and tilt his head. "Ah, but I know you haven't, because otherwise you'd know that I'd written -" and he'd lean in and his voice would become a quiet thread, and he'd whisper things my father wouldn't like to hear. More usually I'd learned to say no, so that he couldn't catch me out. Sometimes I'd say yes knowing he wouldn't believe me, just so that I could hear his own words on his own tongue, in my own ear. The gifts were usually dog-eared second hand copies of obscure books I'd taken a shining to, but once in a while they'd be big, pristine hardbacks fresh with the promise of an undiscovered universe. I could feel the weight of those straight away, and unwrap them slowly. Like undressing a beautiful woman, Richard teased. Richard...I saw him then, walking towards me to pull up a chair. Richard. I wasn't even trying to stop embroidering his name all over my mind. The year was so young, and I had already sinned.

"Signed by the author, that one."

"Oh?" I turned to the first page and there was a dark blue scrawl, all voluptuous loops.

"He's a friend of mine. Ellis Unwin. This is his first book of poems."

"Ah. Was this a favour to you?"

Richard smiled widely. "More like a favour to him. There are only a few copies of this book – he had to pay for them himself. We're promoting it as a kind of festive gift idea, support a local artist. Sadly, I can't let you have this one." He pulled the book out of my hands and set it on the table before him.

"Are they selling?"

"Some. Two people came in to buy a copy in the same afternoon. The trouble is that they're depressing. If he were an artist he'd paint in black and red. Very moody. Not the ideal stocking filler."

"Oh, well. Promising, though, that two people came in to buy one?"

"It would be, if they hadn't been his mother and his roommate."

"I see. Surely they could have had free copies? From the poet, I mean."

"Well, you'd think so. But mothers like to support their sons, and it's in the roommate's best interest that Ellis makes his rent this month." Richard pushed the book to one side, as if he'd had enough of talking about it. "I have a copy at home, if you're interested?" And then his hands were on mine, squeezing lightly.

"What are the poems about?"

"You really want to know?"

"Well, I like depressing. And you know the poet, so it's interesting." I squeezed back.

"What are they about?"

"Oh, far too dark for somebody so young. He's young himself though, saying that. Anyway, the coffee machine's gone bust and I've been between the kitchen and the till all day. I don't want to talk about Ellis' self-indulgent vanity parade. Did you go to your session this week?"

I grinned. "And you suppose that's more uplifting? I have, but I don't want to talk about that either."

"What's he like, your therapist? Do you like him?"

"I don't know. I suppose I do, in a way."

"Think about him at home?"

"Sometimes. Yes, actually. I do."

"Think about me?"

I looked up and noticed his smile. He had a relatively easy face, I thought. Uncomplicated and predictable. Each face has its own catalogue of expressions, different ways of furrowing the brow, of wrinkling the nose or pursing the lips. Each expression as distinctive and mysterious as a constellation, and always the threat of a new one you've never seen before. Not Richard's face, though. His expressions were clear, dimensionless, and I could always tell how he felt. Not like father. You'd think I'd have positive memories of his expressions, broad smiles and lively eyes, but he seemed to flit between disappointment and anger and sadness. I liked Richard's openness, he wore either a comedy mask or a tragedy mask, and there was very little in between.

"Yes, I think about you sometimes, too." The admission was tentative, but it'd done the job, I saw the spark of a smile on his face. He could be oddly coquettish at times, and it was funny. Here we were, the bookshop owner on the cusp of 40, and the strange, damaged girl who haunted him. I should have been the uncertain one, the one out of my depth. Instead I felt strangely dominant. He'd changed since Marianne had left. We didn't talk about her much, not anymore. In the early days it had been difficult not to, her presence was so noticeable. A sprawling mass of lifestyle magazines, blunted lipsticks and garments in muted tones of beige, brown, white, grey. All silk and taffeta and satin. And then there was the underwear, mounds of it. You'd think a woman with such luxurious outfits would have similar lingerie, a treasure trove of ribbon and lace. But it was all grey and tired.

"It's almost closing time." Richard announced. "Shall I shoo these hangers-on and we'll go back to the house?"

"Only if you're sure. It seems to be quite busy?"

"Oh, not really. Not in the useful, money making way. They've just flooded in because of the snow. The money's in the coffee these days, anyway." Richard stood up and tucked his chair in. "Sit tight. It won't take long."

And then he was gone.

About the Writer

23-year-old Tia Williams is from London. She writes to explore subjects she is passionate about, particularly mental health, melancholia and motherhood.

Tia has been writing since she was a child, and as an avid reader has always loved being surrounded by stories. Before beginning her degree, Tia travelled to New York where she volunteered in a local bookshop and developed an interest in travel. After securing a scholarship for academic potential, she studied English and American Literature at Goldsmiths University in London, graduating in 2016. Immersing herself in literature in this way encouraged Tia



to follow her ambition to write a novel, and during a creative writing workshop in 2015 she developed a short story about a young woman's trials with dissociative identity disorder. The themes and characters explored in this story form the basis of Tia's first novel in progress 'Spun from Stars'. She hopes the novel's focus on mental illness will be resonant, particularly at a time when public discussion surrounding mental health issues is gaining momentum.

Since graduating, Tia has worked in Kent as a tutor and freelance travel writer. She plans to study for a postgraduate degree and is currently finishing her novel. Ultimately, she hopes that 'Spun from Stars' will reach a wider audience and that she can turn her passion into her profession.