

TLC Showcase

SAGHEER AFZAL

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Introduction to A Day to Die

A Day to Die is a crime thriller set in Manchester.

Tipu Khan has been suspended from the police. Tormented by his past; he resolves to make a new life for himself and agrees to go to Pakistan and marry his cousin, the sorrowful Sana, mother to a mute child, Rania

Upon his return he is ensnared in a scheme by a covert operative; the cunning and ruthless Sidra, who persuades him to do reconnaissance at a local mosque.

Tipu is kidnapped by the Sheikh; a charismatic and psychotic preacher who endeavours to turn Tipu into a suicide bomber.

Alienated and alone-Tipu must find a way out of his maze and save himself and the lives of other innocent people.

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Two years ago; I was at a low ebb. I had just finished my fourth revision of my manuscript and my agent had received a series of positive rejections. I realised to my dismay that I had to go back to the drawing board and revise my entire approach to writing.

I had approached two literary consultancies many years ago; prior to the publication of my first novel (THE RELUCTANT MULLAH). I found one unhelpful and the other not so bad. This time around I decided that I would enlist the help of a literary consultancy again. But I wanted to be sure that I chose the right one. A writer friend advised me what to look for:

- 1) A good website.
- 2) A publicly listed telephone number where you can actually speak to someone.
- 3) Readers with impeccable credentials.

After some searching I came across TLC. I was more than happy to pay for excellent feedback and advice.

And that is exactly what I got from TLC. I sent my manuscript to them and paid for a quick turnaround and the report that I received from the reader told me exactly where I was going wrong and what I needed to do. My agent also agreed that it was an excellent report and I should act upon the points raised.

I spent the next thirteen months working on a new draft of my manuscript and after it was completed, I had no hesitation in paying for a quick turnaround, and just as before I received excellent feedback and advice.

I have invested a lot in TLC, and to my mind, it was worth every penny of it. One of the main problems writers face is the surfeit of bad advice and feedback at hand. This can be enormously frustrating. Some of the bad feedback that I received ranged from: "Your characters need to use social media a lot more. Have them using twitter or facebook," to 'It's all a bit too Muslim for me!'

Needless to say this can make you want to bang your head against a brick wall. But this also illustrated why I personally value the quality of the feedback offered by TLC. The dynamics and mechanics of a good novel are complex and it is all too easy for a writer to lose their way; especially when you are editing your own work.

The service provided by TLC is invaluable because it can give you an insight into the structural quality of your work. This is what stands TLC apart from other literary consultancies.

A Day to Die by Sagheer Afzal

Extract

A Day to Die

1

The Target looked up at Detective Constable Sidra Din. He smiled sadly at her and shook his head at her as though she were a dim witted child.

"I would like the Halal Pork burger, please," said the Target.

Sidra looked a second too long at the Target. He had never looked so directly at her before. A familiar voice sounded in her left ear.

"Don't look so hard. Keep your eyes down."

Sidra frowned and involuntarily put her hand to her ear. She looked around guiltily.

"What the hell are you doing? How many times have you done that now? Get rid of him," said the angry voice in her earpiece.

"Certainly," replied Sidra. "Let me just heat it up for you."

"Take all the time you need," said the Target.

With hands that were too hurried; Sidra put the burger in the microwave adjacent to her and pushed a button. The plate in the microwave began to rotate; making an ugly scraping noise that grew louder with every second.

The Target was still looking at her. But she did not dare return his gaze. She adjusted her headscarf and wiped her moist brow.

"Is hot no?" asked the Target.

"What do you mean?"

"The headscarf. It is hot to wear on the head all the time if you are not used to it," said the Target. "You don't need to wear it."

"It's okay. I've been wearing it since I was sixteen," replied Sidra.

The Target threw back his head and laughed.

"Sixteen, huh? That is good. Very very good."

"Here's your burger. Enjoy," said Sidra.

The Target handed her a five pound note and said: "You keep the change, madam. You have earned it."

Sidra smiled but did not say anything for fear of betraying her nervousness.

The Target walked away and sat down at a table a few feet away. He looked at his purchase and began to eat.

Sidra stepped back into the corner of the burger van. It was a bright day in the middle of July. But the seating area in front of the van was deserted even though it stood facing a busy mall. The grey van which housed the owner of the irate voice that sounded so often in her ear seemed to glower from across the road.

"I think it's okay, John," said Sidra.

Commander John Walton; her superior in the Counter Terrorism Unit, did not reply. She could imagine the disdain on his bull-dog face.

Sidra bit her nails. She had been in the burger van for four months now. Her job was to keep eyes on the Target; who had a complex Arabic name, and spent most of the day roaming around the shopping mall. He only ever left the mall to go to the burger van. Twice a day he would walk up to the burger van and ask for the day's special; which was always just a lamb burger with chips. A month ago, he asked politely if they served Halal pork burgers. Sidra told him they would start serving it tomorrow.

This had been her first assignment and it had alternated between moments that were extremely tense to long hours where there was nothing to do but count the cars that drove past. The monotony had begun to grind her down. She hated this part of Manchester. There was an all-pervading smell of spices and everybody walked as if they were ready to flee at any given second.

She had been tasked to monitor the Target. But the Target was an atypical terrorist. He seemed to Sidra to be a melancholy man who walked as though he had no other purpose in life.

Sidra stepped forward and looked out again. She looked around apprehensively. She knew she looked awkward but there was nothing she could do about it. Some of the more experienced operatives known as Uncles had the ability to blend in no matter what the circumstance or surrounding. They could switch from one persona to another the way you would switch channels on a TV set. But there was no way she could do that just yet. Everything she felt was mirrored in her face and when upset she tended to gesticulate like an excitable adolescent.

The Target stopped eating and was looking at her. Sidra knew that something was wrong. She detected no menace in his posture. From a distance he looked like a man struggling to make up his mind. He stood up and walked towards her.

The Target went to the rear of the van and knocked on the door.

"John," said Sidra. "He's at the back."

"Ask him what he wants," replied Commander John Walton.

"What is it?" called out Sidra.

"Please open the door. I need to tell you that you are making big mistake."

"John?" queried Sidra.

"Open the door. Let it play," replied Walton.

Sidra swallowed and moved forward to lift the latch and open the back door.

"How can I help you?" said Sidra.

The Target smiled up at her. He lifted up his half-eaten pork burger.

"Tell the man whose voice makes you touch your ear all the time that I have something of great importance to tell him."

Sidra stared at him and took a step back. She had never seen him so close before and she saw that his face was pale and worry worn. His eyes might have looked attractive in another face but now they looked defeated.

"What do you want?" asked Sidra.

The man's eyes welled up.

"You watch me every day for so long now. And I know straight away who you are. The way you keep talking to yourself. The way your hand goes up so quickly to your ear. The way your face relaxes every time that grey van drives away. I ask you for Halal pork burger and you say come back tomorrow and we will have it for you."

The Target wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"You see, there is no such thing as Halal pork burger. Last night I begin to laugh about this but then I cry. Do you know why?"

Sidra shook her head. She placed her hand in her jacket pocket.

"Because you don't know what you are doing. You see, you are just like me. You don't know what else to do. The English have a word for this. Do you know what it is?"

"No," said Sidra. "Don't come any closer."

The Target did not seem to hear. His eyes were huge and dreamy.

"But do you know the worst thing?" asked the Target.

He stepped into the van. The white flecks in his hair seemed to glow. He looked at the burger in his hand and said: "It tastes like shit."

He gasped as though that very admission pained him.

"It always tastes like shit," said the Target. "But you keep selling it and I keep buying it because we are both stuck in a-"

His voice had risen and his eyes were now angry. He drew back his hand as though he wanted to hurl the burger at her.

Sidra shot him. A sound like that of a firecracker exploded in the van. The Target fell back and Sidra saw that her shot had been clumsy and misdirected. She had shot him in the sternum.

The Target fell back and crumpled to the floor.

"A dead end job. Do you see now? A dead end job," said the Target.

He looked at her and nodded approvingly as though he was glad he had been proved right. Then his head sank back. His now lifeless eyes still wide open.

2

Tipu Khan lay in his sparse room within the campus of the Police training college. He looked at the ceiling and saw the paint was flaking. In a strange way, his Spartan surroundings reminded him of the homes he lived in as a child. His father would always buy a run-down house and move in there with his wife and child. When he had finished renovating it, he would sell the house and pocket the profit and then move into another run-down house.

Nobody knew where the money went; his mother never asked, and it did not occur to him to enquire. It never dawned on him until much later in life that rooms whose windows were never double-glazed were not a sign of a father's love for his child.

He placed his hand on the wall and felt a vibration underneath his finger tips. The rooms in this place had such thin walls. He wondered if it was deliberate; perhaps they had the strange notion that if you stuck all the cadets in rooms with flimsy walls then nobody would back-bite. There would be no gossiping. If they thought that they were morons. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Ever since he arrived; he had sensed animosity and resentment. It wasn't long before he found out why. Someone had spread the word that he had been phoned by Inspector Simmons and thanked for his application and told that due to his superlative performance at the interviews, his application would be processed within the week, and he could start the training in just two weeks time. Normally, the application process took months.

Tipu did not feel guilty about this. He knew why he had been fast tracked. The Inspector had sounded too careful when he praised him. This was what they called positive discrimination, but he called it luck. Sometimes it was with you and sometimes it was against you. At first he felt elated but now just one month into the training, he had begun to feel angry. He was tired of being disliked.

The people around him made no effort to conceal their contempt. They called him Citizen Gandhi when they thought he was out of earshot. One of them routinely asked him if he had a pilot's licence. Strangely, there was a black cadet who never seemed to have any trouble. Tipu had tried to befriend him but the guy ignored him.

Tipu had resolved to put up and shut up. He wanted this and he was determined not to let these punks have their way. Sometimes in life you have to take shit. That was what his father had told him. He remembered a story his father had always been fond of telling.

When his father had arrived in England; back in 1963, he had with him a friend by the name of Naseer. The two had grown up together in the village of Aima Jhatt, back in Pakistan. In their first week; a couple of skinheads had broken into the house they shared with the other Pakistanis. The skinheads both carried knives and demanded they give all their money. They obeyed. They thought that they were twelve men and could easily overpower two men, even with knives, simply never crossed their minds. They had all stood up, and meekly handed over their money: which they had to send back home to their emaciated families.

Naseer could not live with the indignity of what had happened. Two weeks later he saw one of the skinheads and immediately attacked him. Naseer was promptly arrested and then deported. He now eked a living as a taxi driver in Rawalpindi. He wore stained clothes, and his children always looked dirty and unkempt. All because he could not put up and shut up, said his father. He was too proud to take shit. And look where it had got him.

Tipu smiled. His father, Muhammad Khan, had always been a very humble man. Never one to raise his voice in protest, and always so very willing to turn the other cheek. Especially when it came to his brothers.

He heard a sound and turned his head sharply to the wall.

Keith Dulling, the owner of the room next door, had returned. Somebody else was with him. An obnoxious man known as Tom Clarke. Tipu felt his neck tighten. Those two would always raise their voices when they were together. They wanted to be sure he heard every word they said.

"One time, I'm driving along and I see this Paki in front of me. His kids all excited like. So I flash at him and pull him over. I says to him: 'Where you going, sir?' And he says, 'I'm going to the holiday camp'. I took one look at him and thought you dirty Paki. The way he was looking at me, I knew something was wrong. Pakis never act hard in front of coppers."

"Yes, they bloody well do," said Clarke.

"No, the ones that have been born here they do. But the ones off the boat they act proper respectful. Anyway, I says to this Paki: 'Can I see your driver's licence and proof of insurance please.' It turns out he don't have any insurance or road tax," said Dulling.

Tipu heard Clarke chuckle loudly.

"So what did you do?" asked Clarke.

"I gave him six points on his license and fined him two hundred pounds," replied Dulling. "Then just to kick him in the balls, I fined him another sixty pounds for no insurance."

Tipu heard Clarke laugh out loud and clap his hands in appreciation.

"There's more," said Dulling. "I said to him if you leave here now, you'll be committing other offences and so I cannot allow you to leave. Him, his wife and three kids out of the fucking car. Had to walk six miles back to the holiday camp."

Dulling and Clarke chortled in unison.

"He probably got a taxi," said Clarke. "And the driver was most likely his brother."

"A dog that's born in a barn is still a dog," said Dulling. "And a Paki that's been born in this country is still just a Paki."

"Careful now," said Clarke. "Citizen Gandhi is next door."

"You okay in there, Mahatma?" said Dulling.

Tipu blinked several times. From the past a memory came unbidden and overwhelmed him.

It was the year he came back from the boarding school in Pakistan. His parents had moved again and he had to go to a new school. At the school there was a boy he knew from a previous school. Andrew Pascal: a very clever boy with red hair who was in the top band. All the teachers said he was headed for Oxford. He liked Andrew. Sometimes he used to talk to him about religion.

It was his first day at the new school. He was in an English lesson. He heard the row behind him erupt with laughter. He turned around and saw Andrew. His head was down and he was talking amusedly to the people on his row. And they were all laughing.

Then Tipu understood. They were laughing at him. Andrew had always laughed at him behind his back.

Tipu straightened and looked at his clenched fists. He smiled grimly and walked out of the room.

3

Dulling winked at Clarke and pointed to the wall. He gestured his hand upwards.

"Citizen Gandhi is a pain in the fucking arse," said Dulling. "He's given me this bloody cold you know. The amount of diseases them lot bring into this country is unbelievable."

Clarke noted the increased volume. He thought for a second.

"You know something? A mate of mine in London who's training to be a copper told me that the first week of his training they had diversity week. When the thing with London is that most of the street robbers are Asian lads. They just run riot."

"You know the problem is everybody is so politically correct. You can't call a a Paki a-"

Dulling never completed his sentence. Tipu kicked the door open and lunged at Dulling. He closed his hands around Dulling's throat.

"Get off me, you dirty little chief," said Dulling.

Clarke got up and pushed Tipu away. Tipu lost his balance and fell to the floor. But within a second he was back on his feet and smashed his fist into Clarke's jaw. He struck Dulling full in the face with the back of his elbow. Dulling fell back and covered his face with his hands.

Tipu stopped for a second and saw that Clarke was unconscious. He laughed and grabbed Dulling by his collar and pulled him forward.

"Gandhi said an eye for an eye blinds the whole world. I say you're just an ignorant bastard," said Tipu.

Tipu threw a bullet-like jab at Dulling's temple and watched him drop to the floor.

"That's what I call protect and serve," said Tipu.

About the Writer

Sagheer Afzal was born in Harrow but spent his formative years were spent in Luton. He stayed reasonably focussed on education and after Luton; he went to Salford University to read Physics.

Whilst at Salford; Sagheer became an active member of the Islamic Society and thus began encountering all the many Islamic groups that comprised of the Muslim diaspora within Britain.

After graduating; Sagheer opted to do an MSc in Optics at Kent University. After failing miserably to profit from the boom in the IT industry he decided to enter the honourable profession of teaching.

After inheriting his tumultuous classes, Sagheer began to seek catharsis in writing. As such the idea of a first novel came to him very suddenly and powerfully during Easter term.

Sagheer's first novel (THE RELUCTANT MULLAH) told the story of young man training to be a Mullah who wishes to break free from the manacles of tradition and find true love in the manic multicultural world around him.

The novel won the KP Blundell award for fiction from the Society Of Authors.

A few years later; Sagheer left mainstream education to work as a teacher for a charity that rehabilitated criminals. During this time, Sagheer saw first-hand the awful dilemma of the disadvantaged youth of the country. Many of whom sadly became embroiled in the life of crime.

Drawing upon his experiences with Police and fledgling criminals, Sagheer decided his next novel would be a crime novel.

Sagheer Afzal is now back working in secondary school education as a science teacher; whilst hard at work; perfecting his new novel: A DAY TO DIE.

