



TLC Showcase

TLC PEN FACTOR WINNER SPECIAL: Lizzie Damilola Blackburn

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Introduction to 'Yinka, where is your Huzband?'

I nearly didn't apply for TLC Pen Factor. Hunched up on the sofa, feeling unwell, I still had a lot of work to do on my application. Then there was that niggling voice in my head telling me that I wasn't good enough. That I didn't have enough writing experience. But somehow—thank God!—I found the strength to persevere and I submitted my application in time. A few weeks later, Aki called me to say I've made the shortlist. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

The Writers' Day itself was amazing. Words cannot describe how inspiring it is to rub shoulders with talented writers all from different walks of life. I made friends quickly. Everyone was super friendly, including the staff at TLC. The sessions were informative, engaging and fun. I gobbled the information as though it was food.

Then after lunch it was time to do my pitch. Eek! Meeting the other finalists beforehand helped ease the nerves. When I stepped up to the lectern, I told myself 'whatever happens, just enjoy it.' And do you know what? I absolutely did. The audience was very encouraging. Laughing in all the right places and nodding their heads. And the feedback I received from the agents was something out of a dream. I couldn't believe they loved my writing. *My writing!*

When Aki announced that I was this year's TLC Pen Factor winner, I honestly felt as if I had won the lottery. But I'll go one step further and say I won something bigger than that. To receive such positive feedback from the agents and the writers is priceless – no amount of money can match that.

Thank you TLC for this life-changing opportunity. I'm a giant leap closer to my dream of becoming a published author.

Extract from 2019 TLC Pen Factor Winner 'Yinka, where is your Huzband?' by Lizzie Damilola Blackburn

One

Shit! Sorry, God. I mean, crap!

With wide eyes, I stare at my phone, at the disaster I've just caused. Under my ex-boyfriend's latest Facebook photo, the one of him wearing a ridiculous elf Christmas jumper is a big, blue thumbs-up.

I liked his photo.

I'm such an idiot.

With my thumping heart competing against the blaring music, I hit the 'like' button again to undo my wrongs. Except I'm too nervous and my jittering thumb ends up pressing the 'like' button twice; and so it appears that I've 'unliked' the photo, changed my mind, and then 'liked' it again.

I squeak.

And then I drop my phone.

And then I kiss my teeth as I bend forward in my chair to reach for it, only for a dark hand, as dark as mine, to get there before me. I look up. It's Mum.

'Yinka! Must you be so antisocial?' she spits in the thick Nigerian accent that she still has despite having moved to the UK way back in the eighties. 'Today is your sister's baby shower. Please. Don't embarrass me.' She scowls and shoves my phone in my hand, watching me like a hawk as I put it away.

This is so Nana's fault, I think to myself as I lift my very flat bum from the plastic chair to shove my phone into my jeans back pocket. If she'd got here at the time that I'd asked her to, then I wouldn't have bothered to have a nose around on Facebook. But then this is my best friend Nana we're talking about. The girl may be British Ghanaian, but she sure knows how to abuse the concept of "African time."

Satisfied and with my phone now out of sight, Mum waddles away.

She weaves her way into the throng of dancers that have taken up the centre of Kemi's living room.

I pick up from underneath my chair my half-eaten plate of jollof rice. Mum had deliberately made the rice mild to cater to the palates of Kemi's non-ethnic friends, and so I had gobbled up the few boiled plantains and the whole fried snappa instead.

Finally, Mum reaches the front of the living room, her elephant-swaying hips following. She positions herself near a 'Congrats! You're having a boy' balloon and claps as if she's trying to frighten away a bunch of pigeons.

'Hello! Hello! Can I have everyone's attention, please?'

But the music drowns her out. And my younger sister along with a handful of her melanated friends carry on dancing and wailing to the song. Except Kemi goes one step further. As though she has completely forgotten about the massive bump attached to her front, she dips her knees and bends her back and twerks the even bigger bump attached to her back.

Mum switches tactics; she waves her arms, as though she's lost at sea. 'Sorry, can I have everyone's atten—'

'Excuse me, everyone!' Big Mama's twenty-thousand-decibel voice punches through the music and jolts a few of Kemi's friends sitting nearby. 'Can everyone stop what they're doing? Yinka's mum wants to say something.'

As expected, my dad's sister's announcement does the trick. And within seconds, conversations end abruptly, phones are put away, and like rolling snooker balls, the dancers disperse from the centre to stand along the sides of the room. With one hand supporting her beach ball stomach, Kemi penguin-walks to the sound system and switches the music off.

'Thank you,' says Mum, pressing her palms together as if she's about to give an awards acceptance speech. 'And thank you to all of you for coming to celebrate my daughter's transition into motherhood.' She swings her head around to Kemi and flashes her a maternal smile. 'As you know, motherhood is a very important chapter in a woman's life. So, I just want to dedicate this time to praying over Kemi, her *huzband* and the baby. So, everyone, please rise to your

feet and hold the hand of the person standing next to you.'

A lot of shuffling follows as those that are sitting rise. They form a chain circle with the already standing dancers by extending and interlocking their hands.

'Don't look so nervous,' I hear Mum say to Kemi's workmates, who are now watermelon red in the face. 'If you don't believe in God, you can just bow your head as a sign of respect.'

I grab the hands of Kemi's friends who are standing on either side of me. Bowing my head, Mum clears her throat.

'Dear heavenly Father.'

What feels like 10 minutes later . . .

'I thank you, Lord, for granting me my heart's desire to become a grandma—an *iya-iya*. I pray that your peace, love and guidance will be with my daughter in the delivery room. She will be well, in Jesus's name. Her *huzband* will be well, in Jesus's name. The baby will be well, in Jesus's name.'

'Amen,' we all mutter; the enthusiasm that my four aunties had at the start of the prayer now gone.

'I thank you, Lord, for bringing Kemi and my son-in-law, Kunle, together while they were studying at university. I pray that you'll bless Kunle as he becomes a dad and that you will guide him as the head of his family.'

'Amen.'

Oh, gosh. We all now sound like zombies.

Mum prays some more, saying the same thing in different ways and using different words and phrases to refer to things that have the same meaning: protection, safety and security. No weapon formed against Kemi shall prosper. There's a shooting pain in my ankle, and my knees begin to wobble. Then, at long last, Mum says what everyone has been waiting for: 'Lord, answer our prayers. In Jesus's sweet, holy, precious name we pray.'

The last 'Amen' is triumphant.

I open my eyes to see a Mexican wave of women dashing to their seats, each breathing a loud sigh of relief—except for Big Mama. She's already slumped in her chair, shoes kicked off and legs outstretched. Her toenails look like pork scratchings dipped in red paint. With a plate of *chin-chin* balancing on her protruding stomach, she scoffs a handful of the biscuit-like snack, crunching like a horse chewing a carrot. I smile. Big Mama may be the loudest of my three-hundred odd aunties—yes, because in Nigerian culture, every Afro-Caribbean woman who is older than you by at least ten years, is by default, your auntie, regardless of whether or not you're blood-related—but still, I cannot help but love the woman.

'Hold on,' she blurts, spraying crumbs all over her polka dots blouse as she thrusts forward in her armchair. 'Tolu! You didn't pray for your eldest daughter.'

Mum, who has for the past two hours been patting her bird's nest of a weave sporadically as if she has fleas, turns to me with wide eyes. 'Oh, yes,' she exclaims, using one hand to hoist up the African print cloth that is tied around her hips, while the other continues to pat her head to ease her itchy scalp. 'How could I forget about Yinka? The investment banker!'

Heads swoosh in my direction, and despite my attempts of avoiding all eye contact with my aunties all afternoon, I notice a few of them grinning at me encouragingly. I rub a hand at the back of my neck, plastering what I can only assume is an awkward smile.

Great. Thanks for getting my profession wrong again, Mum. Honestly, no matter how many times I've told her that I work as an operations manager at an investment bank, she still prefers to call me an investment banker and she tells all of her friends that I'm one too. Now, whether she does this due to pride or ease is something I'm still unsure of. After all, the profession of an 'investment banker' is the first thing that comes to mind whenever I tell someone that I work for Godfrey & Jackson. No one ever thinks of the operations team, the unsung heroes who work in "back office," and unlike their revenue generating colleagues, do all the tedious processes to settle each bankers' trade. Still, whatever the reason behind Mum's blissful ignorance, she sure does mention my profession as an "investment banker" a hell of a lot more than she mentions Kemi's job as an art teacher—but not to the extent to which she gloats about Kemi being married or having a baby, of course.

'Yes!' Mum cries, clapping again. 'God has blessed me with two daughters. I should pray for them both. *Eh-yah!* Everybody. Again. Rise to your feet. We have to pray for Yinka.'

The groans are quiet yet loud enough to bounce off each wall of the room.

'Ah-ah! What is all this gr'gr'grumbling?' The remark comes from Big Mama, of course. And yet, while everyone is reluctantly rising to their feet, she's still sitting comfortably on her throne.

About the Writer

Lizzie Damilola Blackburn was born and raised in London by a patriotic Nigerian dad and a Pentecostal Nigerian mum and is currently married to a British Jamaican filmmaker. After encountering many challenges dating as a black Christian woman, Lizzie decided to turn her experiences into a collection of short stories. The blog 'Christian Dating Dilemmas' was born. Since then, Lizzie has evolved one particular story into a novel—*Yinka, where is your Husband?*—which she is currently writing. In 2017, Lizzie won [Spread the](#)



[Word's City of Stories](#) short story competition for the Westminster Borough. She was also a shortlist for [The Guardian's International Development Journalism Competition](#). She currently volunteers at Spread the Word's events and is a self-confessed Netflix addict. Her mission as a writer is to shake-up contemporary women's fiction so that black women are seen and heard.

MEET THE TLC PEN FACTOR 2019 FINALISTS

Lucy Basey

Biography

Lucy is a mother of three and writer of YA fiction. She lives in Leicestershire where she works for her husband's business. She spent her childhood holidaying in forests, being told fairy stories by her mother, which is where her love of storytelling was born. She now delights her children with weird and wonderful stories of her own. Lucy has a BSc in Media Production, has completed online writing courses and has an increasingly dodgy search history thanks to researching for her stories. She still has hopes of falling down a rabbit hole and into a fairy kingdom one day.



'The Other Side of Darkness'

It isn't easy, running a criminal empire; James Hays is learning the hard way, inheriting the family business, and a growing list of enemies, in the aftermath of his father's imprisonment.

When quiet and unassuming Amy Reeve, from school, comes asking for an illicit favour, James is too intrigued to turn her away; what secret could be terrible enough to lure wholesome Amy into the darkness?

In his quest to find out, and her steadfast silence, the pair become embroiled in a part of the London underworld very few escape, and soon learn that love can be the greatest saviour and sacrifice of all.

Lucy Says

"When I discovered I had been shortlisted, I felt a mix of amazement, excitement and sheer dread. I'd never liked going anywhere alone, and the idea of reading my work, exposing parts of my secret to a room full of strangers was one of the most daunting things ever. It was all worry wasted. As soon as I got there - a second time as my husband had walked me in once and I bottled it and left - I saw nothing but smiley, friendly faces. Reading my work aloud for the first time was surprisingly wonderful and freeing. The feedback from the agents was invaluable. It's the sort of thing readers dream about, to know what an agent would think of their pitch, and here we were with four of them! I'd tell anyone to enter the competition, it might be the medicine your writing, or you, need!"

Extract

Wednesday

14th May

21:03

Fear was indisputably the most unpleasant of all emotions in Amy's opinion. Fear for Amy consisted of a dreadful, almost audible, increase in the rate of her heart, a feeling of plummeting into oblivion, grasping at something that would turn to nothing, sweat adorned panic attacks and the urge to fight the inevitable. Some, yet not all, of these sensations were there now, buzzing in her temples as she burst out of the dark alleyway onto the street.

For some time, Amy had been deciphering which of her fears were rational and which were irrational.

Death, she had figured, would be an irrational fear due to its unavoidable nature. This notion meant that the fear was no less terrifying, but irrational none the less.

A rational fear was perhaps the fear that he wasn't going to be at their meeting spot. An irrational fear was perhaps that he was. Or maybe it was the other way around entirely.

It wasn't that she was undecided in her plans, there was no other way in her opinion, but that didn't seem to quell the apprehension.

These were Amy's musings as she listened to her shallow breaths and the sound of her heart pounding, her legs aching as she pushed herself onwards.

The rain had been falling for just over an hour before she'd set out. Every time her feet met the pavement water sprayed up her trouser legs, soaking her socks. She was already late. Navigating her way around the puddles would have only lengthened her journey.

A spasm of pain radiated up from her ankle to her knee. Her run fell to a jog. She set her sights on her destination, taking her mind above the cramp that crippled her toes.

Mind over matter, that's what created most solutions.

A dim light flickered above the Staffley Arms sign that creaked as the wind whipped around the wooden panel, the hinges groaning under the strain. She took the last few yards at a walk to level her breathing.

The pub door opened outwards just as she reached it. An elderly man stumbled over the threshold, adjusting his trilby hat and grumbling about the rain as he staggered past her.

Amy caught the closing door, tentatively venturing inside. It was the sort of place she had expected; pokey, sticky floors and the pungent smell of alcohol dancing with tangy air freshener. The door slammed shut behind her and in the same instance the three men at the bar turned to face her. She stood there a moment, her arms folded across her chest, her knees pressing against each other while the men appraised her with curious expressions.

The tables dotted around the immediate bar area were all empty. He hadn't come. If he had, he'd already left. Dejectedly, Amy turned to leave.

Just as she did, she spotted a figure sitting at a table in the bay window to her right. It was the darkest part of the pub, which was probably why she hadn't seen him initially. Now that she had, she felt as though her knees had fallen out with her thighs, like they no longer wanted to support them.

He had come.

He waited, his fingers drumming impatiently beside a nearly empty pint glass.

Rational, that's what her fear had been, because now she was cementing the foundations of her plan. If he agreed to help, there'd be no way back.

James Hays looked bulkier than he had appeared in the newspapers. His face had become more angular since school, diamond shaped almost. But the same glassy, nearly translucent, green eyes she remembered stared back at her. He hadn't bothered to take his black jacket off, the collar of which sat high, framing his face. Perhaps he didn't intend on staying.

He stopped the drumming of fingers and watched as Amy walked towards him. She offered a small smile. He didn't return it.

'Didn't think you were going to show,' he said. 'You don't seem the sort.'

'What do you mean?' Amy asked.

'You don't look like the sort of person to track down a stranger on a social networking site to arrange a meeting.'

'I wouldn't use the word "stranger". I used to see you around school less than two years ago.'

James sniggered, the sound escaping through a downturned mouth that suggested a foul taste. 'And the newspapers.'

Anne Ekin

Biography

Anne is a scientist working in medical research. She recently completed an MA in Creative Writing which she passed with distinction. Anne was awarded the University of Sussex Vice Chancellor's Prize for the best MA of the year. This is her debut novel.



'The Mother Signature'

Helen, an archaeologist is searching for Mary, a mysterious scientist in her mother's past. She uncovers the story of a woman whose research is stolen by her PhD supervisor, but then the trail goes cold. A discovery of a bronze age skeleton with a rare genetic mutation finally leads Helen to find Mary.

Anne Says

"Being short-listed to pitch to a panel of agents and an audience gave me an invaluable opportunity. The positive feedback from the agents and many members of the audience gave a boost to my confidence and my determination to get my novel published."

Extract

Mary leans on the balustrade of the open stairwell and gazes through the wall of glass. The clouds are folded like ripples of sand sculpted by a receding sea. What is it her father calls this type of sky: something to do with fish? And then she remembers: a mackerel sky, a sign there will be rain.

When her PhD viva had ended, her examiners had asked her to wait outside the room while they made their decision. She had paced up and down in the claustrophobic corridor. But the wait seemed interminable, so she escaped to this vast space where she can breathe.

Why are they taking so long? Perhaps they've finished and are looking for her.

She rushes back to the corridor, but the door is still closed. Through it, she can hear the indecipherable murmurings of her examiners grow louder and then diminish. Then there is a hush, like the sudden silence when rain beating on the windows stops. Is this it? A door hinge squeaks and Dr Wheeler appears in the doorway and beckons her into the room. He is smiling. Does that mean she has passed? Her heart begins to thud and then she sees Professor Snell is standing and he too is smiling. 'Congratulations,' he says.

'Well done, Mary,' says Dr Wheeler holding out his hand.

As she shakes it the elation bubbling inside her is stilled. The expression on Dr Wheeler's face has changed. Something is wrong.

'Mary can you sit down, there is something we need to explain to you.'

Her two examiners resume their seated positions and she sits in the chair opposite them. A slice of sunlight slants across the table, fades then disappears. The radiator gurgles and clicks.

'I understand,' says Dr Wheeler, 'that you've not been in Cambridge or in the department for some time.'

She nods. Where's this is going?

'I wonder if you are aware that the results you presented in your thesis have been published by your supervisor.'

For a moment she cannot comprehend what he means. As if her mind has stalled. Then as her brain re-engages, what Paul Meyer has done, emerges before her with absolute clarity. Of course, she had sent him a draft of the thesis before submission, asking for his feedback. He never responded; perhaps she was foolish to think he would. She had sent him all her data. She had made it easy for him.

Dr Wheeler's chair creaks as he leans forward. 'The reason we took so long to make a decision is because the research has to be yours and it has to be original. The publication of the work without your name as an author compromises that.'

She shakes her head. Beneath the table her hands curl into fists. Paul Meyer has had his final revenge. He is the one with power and she is nothing.

Meriel Beattie

Biography

Meriel Beattie was born in Wales to homesick Scottish parents, which meant a lot of time on the motorway, playing I-Spy in the back of the car. The travel thing continued into adult life – she was a correspondent for Reuters and the BBC in Eastern Europe and the Balkans and later worked in Pakistan and Turkey for *The Independent*. Back in the UK, she was a co-presenter for the Radio 4 series *Crossing Continents*. The advantage of all this has been adventure and friendship in places with more sunshine and (usually) better wine than here. The downside can be itchy feet. She now lives in Brighton with her family – and a handy train to Gatwick if the travel urge gets too much.

'Angora'

'Angora' is an historical thriller set in neutral wartime Turkey in 1944. It explores what – and who any of us are prepared to exploit, in order to further our own ends. It's based on a real, still-unsolved, spy case.

Meriel Says

"I realised the huge value of entering TLC's Pen Factor competition the moment I pressed 'send' on my entry. Until then, I had never written a proper pitch letter or synopsis - and entering forced me to focus on what my novel is about and how to express that. I was astonished to find myself on the shortlist and the prospect of doing a live pitch was nerve-wracking. But Writers' Day couldn't have been more welcoming: the speakers were great, the TLC team were friendly and supportive - and the other writers in the room easy to talk to. The finalists were lovely: we bonded quickly over shared nerves. Actually doing the pitch wasn't as daunting as any of us imagined – and I came away with really helpful feedback from industry professionals. If, like me, you're unsure whether to enter, I'd urge you to go for it – there are so many positives."

Extract

Prologue

Nicosia, Cyprus, April 1944.

"Let me tell you something about Turkish," Charles Fulton said.

The corporal, who had finished pouring the coffee, returned to his side of the desk and took up his pencil.

"The verbs," Charles continued, "build up from suffixes. You can add on all manner of things to the back of a word to indicate tense or mood or motion and one of these is *"imiş."* It has no exact time reference. Rather it infers that the speaker does not have first-hand information about what he is stating but is merely reporting what he has been told. There is no direct equivalent in English. The meaning can only be conveyed by inserting terms such as 'apparently', or 'seemingly' or 'supposedly'."

"Do you wish me to write any of that down, Sir, for the report?"

"No, thank you," Charles said. "But it's something that's worth bearing in mind, as we try to make sense of it all."

Chapter One

Ankara, Turkey, January 1944.

Weary, silent and fitted stiffly into overcoats, scarves and gloves, the passengers of the Taurus Express gathered themselves and their luggage half in and half out of their overnight compartments, the corridor milky with the weak January light. The train, which had ground its way up from Adana through nine hours over the treeless Plateau, had pulled into the platform at Ankara five minutes earlier. Yet still no one disembarked.

Charles Fulton, opening the door of his compartment, found his way blocked by a white-haired couple in identical wool coats. They had wedged between them a green leather suitcase and were trying to fasten its distended bulk with a fraying canvas strap. Re-closing the door, Charles swung his small bag back

onto his tousled bunk and sat down beside it to wait.

It had been an uncomfortable night. The heating, certainly in the first-class sleeping compartment of which Charles had been sole occupant, had gone cold shortly before midnight. He had been obliged to get up, put his socks back on and tug down an extra blanket from the vacant bunk above. Then, somewhere in the pitch bleakness of the Anatolian Plateau, he had opened his eyes to realise that the train was no longer moving. For thirty minutes – fifty – it remained immobile. Then it shuddered backwards, hauled forwards, stopped again – before swaying wearily on. Around four in the morning the heating pipes had throbbed back into life with such oily ferocity that Charles had thrown off the blankets and shunted down the window, only to be assailed by a whining inch of sleet. For the remainder of the night he had lain on top of the narrow bunk, eyes closed but not sleeping, until the conductor rapped at the door to announce their approach to Ankara.

Charles' compartment door shunted open. The sleeping car attendant, hollow-eyed and wiry, had somehow succeeded in insinuating both himself and a bulging canvas sack along the corridor, past the waiting travellers and luggage. He made an approximate bow.

"Les draps, si'il vous plaît, bedding please, Bettwäsche bitte."

The man began to claw the sheets and pillow covers into a ball. Charles addressed him in Turkish. Did he know what was causing the delay?

"We are required to wait for the sleeper from Istanbul, Sir," the attendant said. He paired the corners of the blankets, shook them, then folded them into quarters. "The sleeper from Istanbul has only just arrived on the platform behind, and the passengers of the sleeper from Adana are not permitted to climb down until the passengers from the sleeper from Istanbul have done so."

"And do you know why this train stopped during the night? Was there snow on the line?"

The attendant frowned. "This train is on time, Sir," he said, posting the folded blankets onto the upper bunk. "It is the Istanbul train, which is late. It is only that the Istanbul train must disembark first."

"I understand," said Charles, "But this train did stop, sometime after Konya."

"No, sir, no stops after Konya. This train is on time, Sir." Hoisting the re-knotted bundle onto one epauletted shoulder, the attendant bowed again and squeezed back into the corridor.

Charles was not in a hurry. His appointment with Busk, Second Secretary at the British Embassy, was at ten o'clock and it was only a quarter past eight. He knew Ankara a little, or at least enough to understand that there was little to know. He would take a taxi from the station into the town, find a barber and then walk up to the Embassy.

Pamela Banayoti

Biography

London living, London loving, Pamela's past experience includes Editorial, Public Relations, and bringing joy to the world. At present, she is a Teacher of English Language and Literature where her love of reading and writing comes to life every day. Writing has always been her way of making sense of the world and with *Big Girl Blues*, her protagonist shares many of the struggles she has experienced. Pamela hopes readers will find a connection with her voice.



'Big Girl Blues'

'Big Girl Blues' opens with the adult Lena on a hospital bed, having taken an overdose. As her best friend, Noura, comforts her, Lena thinks back to the perfect day she spent with her brother Jake, and her father, in Legoland. The succeeding stories go on to narrate Lena's childhood experiences where she witnessed her mother's abuse at the hands of her alcoholic father. After her father abandons the family, and her brother runs away from home as a teenager, she learns to survive the struggles that come with growing up in an immigrant household in London, as she attempts to reconcile her Eastern and Western identities.

Pamela Says

"After clicking refresh every day after having entered the competition, the wonderful news that I had been shortlisted for the Pen Factor came through my inbox. Initially, I thought I would be hit with a barrage of butterflies at the thought of reading aloud, but the atmosphere and community of readers and writers was so welcoming, that it helped me remain calm. What an incredible experience it was to read my words aloud to a nurturing crowd. The entire TLC team have been amazing throughout this process."

Extract

In this land of Lego, there are no plastic bricks. Only wiry tubes that disappear into the flesh like thin brushes plunging into buckets of paint. It's white outside. Not grey or blue, but white and new. Noura is with me. We've been here a total of three hours. Having slept over the night before, she brought me to St. Mary's after she saw me curling in pain. We clambered into a taxi even though the hospital is around the corner from my flat, went straight to A and E, had my toxic levels read, and now we sit on this bed. It's just tubes and the smell and the smell. Putting my head to the pillow, I close my eyes and huddle into myself.

In the spring of 2000, Baba took Jake and I to Legoland. We had dreamt of this day for years. Look at the photograph, and you see a little girl standing by Buckingham plastic. Buckingham Palace. Look closer, and just beneath the wispy hairs gathered in a silk scrunchie, you'll see the chicken pox scar beneath her left temple. That's me. Jake is as tall as the Big plastic Ben. Jake is Jake. He always had that injured look on his face, like he was hurt with the world and didn't really understand it. But when he smiled...

NHS direct. Can I have your name and number?

Hello. I'm --. My number is --, I say into the phone. Noura made me call.

Hello --. Is it a query you have for us today?

Well, yes.

What's the matter?

My stomach is cramping and I can't walk.

Have you eaten anything in the last 48 hours that may have contributed to this?

Possibly, I say, shaking.

What is it -- ?

My iron tablets.

How many did you take?

Forty.

The line goes quiet and my stomach rumbles with sick.

Fourteen?

Forty. A muted intake of breath. They aren't supposed to do that. The pause makes me breathe in hard. I dread the question, but inevitably know that what I had done would be vocalised and turned into something it wasn't.

Are you suicidal?

Four times over I am asked. The receptionist at A&E. The nurse. The doctor. The psychiatrist. I should have written it all down.

From one ride to the other, game after game, candy floss and sticky fingers, burning toffee and screams of delight. Legoland was the dream and finally we had arrived. We didn't win anything. Baba was so happy that day, I think he had more fun than we did. With his fleece wrapped around his waist, he looked so scrawny – it was only his paunch that stretched the white cotton of his shirt. Walking through the maze of faces and shoe laces, I wondered what we looked like from the outside. Two dads out with their children— no mothers allowed. That day, Noura and I were yet to become best friends. She didn't have a mum and today, my mum wasn't with us because it was just after the split and Baba had wanted to take us out. For years he made promises. I can't tell you how many times – but it doesn't matter because we finally got to go Legoland. Jake had one of those carnival whistles that he could blow on every time he got scared, or if he strayed. He never did blow on it though -- I made sure of that. I put my hand in his like Mum would.

I was ayoun Baba. I was my father's eyes. But Jake belonged to Mum and she wasn't there that day you see. Besides, the night before Legoland day, we stayed with Baba in his hotel. Actually, it was more like a hostel up in Kilburn where syringes lay in street corners by the doors (Baba later told us that he had bought plastic needles and filled it with grape juice so he could show it to the council telling them it wasn't fit for his children who came round all the time). That got him his own flat pretty quick, where it wasn't much better, where the boys riding on their bikes would still holler at me.