

# TLC Showcase

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CARL EL KHOURY

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## Introduction to *Dishonoured*

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**D***ishonoured* (which is a working title) revolves around Marc Tueini, a Lebanese architectural student trying to run from his past, mourning the loss of his beloved Yasmina and blaming himself for what happened to her. He decides the only way to escape his guilt and shame is to leave Lebanon and move to London. But when Western ideals come up against traditional belief systems, Marc is forced to choose between staying in the good graces of his family and being true to himself. As he undertakes a journey of exploration – of his sexuality, his lifestyle, and his relationship to religion – Marc must also deal with the consequences of the decision years ago that cost him Yasmina. Along this journey, Marc finds unforeseen joys, but also unimaginable heartbreak. To what lengths will he go to keep from losing his family? Will they even accept him anymore, now that he has discovered himself? Part of Marc loves his home of Lebanon, but is there a place for him in a society where sexuality is repressed, mental illness is minimized, and religious beliefs are unquestionable? The novel features themes of mental health, personal growth, sexual identity, and the cultural tensions of change versus tradition. Many of the themes in this book, my debut novel, are drawn from my own experience of emigrating to London after 23 years of living in Lebanon.

The book was written over the course of fifteen months. I've had the privilege – thanks to TLC – to undertake a mentorship program with award winning author Ray Robinson, who's helped me transform a mediocre draft into a manuscript I could be proud of. My level of confidence in this story further increased after receiving a full assessment from a second editor, the incomparable Thalia Suzuma. I'm extremely grateful to both Ray and Thalia for their patience, their wisdom and their interest in my story. Most importantly, I'm thankful to The Literary Consultancy. If it weren't for their mentorship program, this project would have still been an incomplete story that I only dream of writing.

## Extract from *Dishonoured* by Carl El Khoury

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The following day, I drove to the villa to spend the evening with Mum. Silence filled the hallways as I entered the foyer and walked past the coat hanger where Pap's golf gear sat in the shadow of his memory, passed the family portraits hanging on the wall (Mum's haughty look of a queen, Salim's posture of a hero, Pap's gaze of a sage, and me – looking scrawny and pathetic), and found Mum with Salim on the mezzanine beside the staircase, staring at me with bemusement – an air of dread and guilt washing over her face. I hadn't seen Salim in six months.

Salim's stare gored me like a charging bull. 'You took Mum to a bar last night?' he said, steepling his fingers. He made me think of a mob boss.

I approached him with prudence. His calmness was agitating me. 'Yes, so?'

'You got her drunk in front of my colleagues.'

'She wasn't drunk,' I said, trying to speak without compunction.

'Are you doing this on purpose? Do you want to decimate our reputation?'

I stood frozen.

'Can you not fathom how getting our mother drunk in public hurts the business, our legacy, everything I'm building for you?'

I slouched against the handrail.

'Are you that much of an idiot?'

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. 'Get over yourself Salim, it's not that big of a deal.'

'I'm tired of cleaning up your mess, Marc.' The low-key voice made my knees flutter to my knees like fledging sparrows trying to leave the nest. 'You're not welcomed in this home anymore.'

'Is that supposed to scare me?'

He grimaced. 'Marc, don't let me get angry now. I can beat the shit out of you if I want to.'

'Stop it,' said Mum, grabbing Salim's arm. 'Both of you stop. No more fighting. Please.'

Salim — ignoring Mum — raised a finger. 'I'm politely asking you to leave Marc.'

'And I'm politely telling you to go fuck yourself.'

Before I could say anything else, he leaped forward — Mum's caterwaul seeping behind him. And then, in a matter of a second, my worst fear came crashing down on me.

It happened in flashes like a sequence of snapshots in a stop motion film because my mind blinked several times; blink — two hands on my chest shoving me to the floor, blink — a kick so hard it made me howl in agony, blink — a fist like steel striking my cheek. And I didn't hear Mum's cries until gravity sealed my back to the marble tiles — coldness slithering through my skin — and Salim's hands wreathed about my neck, my arms jolting from the floor and clasping his shoulders as I tried to knee him in the groin. It felt like wrestling a boulder — body crushing between ground and stone as I tried to gasp for air, Salim's fingers sinking into my skin and Mum's arms curling around Salim's stomach as she tried to pull him away. Bombastic cries for help and lights changing into patterns of discs, quavering and colliding into fogs of light as the room shone brighter and brighter and the excruciating pain in my head plunged deeper and deeper into my skull, making me yearn for the blade of a guillotine to descend upon my neck and spare me.

I'd never known this much pain before, never thought I'd ever feel it, never felt anything tearing this way through my skin, blocking the blood from reaching my brain.

'Get off! Get off!' cried Mum, trying to heave Salim off my body. 'You're killing him! You're killing your brother! He's your brother!'

No control over my body — arms wagging back and forth, legs kicking the air, a bomb ticking in my head, and Salim's reptile eyes on mine growing clearer and clearer as the room around us faded into haze and then, behind Salim, as his hands unclasped my neck, I heard the sound of his grunt and someone falling to the floor — Mum. Her body tumbling down the stairs, her shrieks of pain echoing down the hallway as I tried to call for her while heaving up my body to kneel, palms fastened to the floor, and then Salim's cries as he rushed down the stairs.

I was still feeling his fingers around my neck and the need to breathe tore my mouth open as I coughed and coughed, clinging to life and gasping for air, with a hand pressing against my chest in search for a heartbeat.

As I came out of my blindness, the sound of Salim muttering something I couldn't discern echoed up the stairs, but I could barely hear or move or breathe, my awareness slowly coming back to me as I gripped the handrail and pulled myself to my feet, leaning on the steel rail to avoid collapsing on the stairs. And as I motioned forward, one step after another, my vision cleared again and the sight shattered me. Blood everywhere. On every step patches of blood, at the bottom of the stairwell patches of blood, and the trail of blood led me to her – on her back, breathless or not I couldn't tell, Salim crying above her.

Seeming disoriented, he slid his fingers down his face – sweating and panting. 'Marco?' he said, wiping the tears off his cheek with the back of his hand, staggering forward, then clasping his hands and murmuring: 'Please God. Please help us. I'm so sorry. Dear God. Oh God, oh God, oh God.' He fell on his knees, his hands on Mum's shoulders. 'Please God, please forgive me.'

Walking toward him, I squeezed my fists – nails sinking into my skin: 'Get out of the house.' Voice hoarse and cracking.

Salim, holding Mum's head: 'I... I called the Red Cross. They're coming.'

Shoving him away from Mum's body. 'Get out of the house!'

'Marco, it was an accident. I didn't mean to push so hard.'

With every fibre of my being: 'Get out of the fucking house!' I kicked him in the stomach – tears cascading down my face. 'Now!' Another kick. 'Get out!' And another one on his back.

'Marco please listen to me.' Palms up, trying to speak over my screams.

My throat on fire. My head on the verge of exploding. 'Get the fuck out now!' I rushed to the coat hanger and pulled a club from Pap's golf bag and motioned toward Salim. 'Get the fuck out of the house!' One hit on his shoulder. 'Get the fuck out of my life!' Another hit on his stomach.

'Marco!'

'Now! Out!'

'Marco.' Coughing, gasping for breath. 'You're hurting me, please!'

Clang on the floor. 'Out!' Bang on the wall. 'Out! Out!'

'Calm down!' He shouted, and raised an arm to cover his face, using the second arm to crawl away from me. 'Please stop!' His voice breaking in sobs. His arm soared into the air, shaking.

With the veins in my forehead throbbing under my skin, I swung the club again, hitting the tile next to his leg — clang! And I kept hitting, screaming with every thrust I heaved — clang! clang! clang! until he lifted himself and rushed out of the house, my voice following him through the door: 'You fucking animal! I hope you fucking die!'

Chandelier lights glinting off the white marble on the floor. My body felt weightless, floating out of my control. To be a child again nestling in my mother's arms, her body brimming with the scent of gardenias and bringing me warmth. I drew a palm down her cheek — the red stain on her hair nauseating me — and I studied the rest of her body searching for a sign of life, but the tremor in my hands and the bright lights still shining in my head and dimming my senses wouldn't allow me to concentrate on her body, and when it felt like time had paused, the cries of an ambulance's sirens rang in the distance. Taking deep breaths, I slid two fingers down her neck. And there was a pulse.

## About the Writer

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Carl El Khoury was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon where he attended a French school for fifteen years before completing a Bachelor of Architecture in the Lebanese American University in Byblos.

Whilst at university, he was required to take a class in English Literature, and thus for the first time was introduced to novels written in English (after having been forced to read French books his entire childhood). This was when Carl discovered the love he felt for the art of writing, and when he decided that one day, he'd write his own novel.



After graduating, Carl moved to London and completed a Masters Degree in Real Estate at Cass Business School. After failing to find a sense of happiness in the profession, he decided to take a year off and started drafting what would become a 100,000-word novel in the literary fiction genre.

Drawing upon his own experience of growing up in a conservative society that rejected anyone or anything out of the norm and that subverted tradition, Carl found catharsis in writing a story about a man's struggle with identity, mental illness and religion in a community where such taboo subjects remain in hiding and never discussed.

Carl is now happily living in London and building his own business. To this day, he writes and edits every day and hopes to make a career out of his writing.