

TLC Showcase

NEEL PATEL

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Introduction to *Tobin and Blake*

Tobin and Blake is a dystopian tale, which examines the evolution of current-day race relations, as they become fractured in a society obsessed with social media.

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In present day London, reformed alcoholic, Daniel Tobin meets homeless Martin Blake, whom he takes under his wing, in a bid to help him address his inner demons. Soon, they are targeted by a group of men in pursuit of Blake, prompting Tobin to question his new companion's past.

In 2039, fifteen years after The Resurgence, a global uprising that has destabilised society, Regina (Reggie) Frome commences a journey back to her family home in north London. Her mission is to procure desperately needed medical supplies for her community in the north of England and return without delay.

As the encounter between Tobin and Blake sparks a chain reaction, that echoes into the future, Reggie discovers the true extent of the danger to which she has exposed herself. Soon, she finds herself questioning the fundamental nature of relationships she once held dear, as she struggles to get out of London alive.

The enclosed extract from the novel narrates the arrival of Blake's pursuers as they make the trip down from Bradford to London, creating fear and resentment in their wake.

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In late 2016, after a spell working in Dublin, I returned to London, determined to pursue my writing with a renewed vigour and break the cycle of manuscripts stalling at around a hundred pages. The discipline of writing something every day began to yield results. Often, I would hammer out a page of prose on my mobile during the morning commute, emailing myself a copy to digest later in the evenings. The raw first draft was completed in early 2019, shortly after I had moved to New York. By the

time I returned to London later that year, I had refined the novel into a version, I felt comfortable with sharing.

My experience with TLC was incredibly supportive. After Stephen Carver's detailed and insightful review of the novel, it was flagged as a quality manuscript meriting further attention. I applied another round of edits and found the subsequent review provided by Anna South to also be very constructive and helpful. I really appreciated how Aki, Joe and Nelima kept me informed throughout the process, whilst my manuscript was under consideration.

Extract from *Tobin and Blake* by Neel Patel

London baby!

The train journey had been long, but they had managed to entertain themselves. The cans of lager they carried were cracked open within minutes of sitting down, and soon, the chatter got louder and the laughter more raucous.

The passengers around them sneaked disapproving glances throughout the journey. An elderly couple, their hands clasped in their laps, shook their heads, and looked at each other tight-lipped. The husband watched them through smeared spectacles, giving his wife's trembling arm a reassuring squeeze. A mother vainly signalled to her two children to stop staring at the three men sitting diagonally across from them. The five-year old boy and his younger sister continued to solemnly focus their attention on the strangers. Eventually, one of them noticed. He shook his long hair until it draped over his face like a curtain, sticking his tongue out and crossing his eyes, generating further mirth amongst his companions.

When they saw the ticket inspector approaching, they had the presence of mind to stuff the cans back into their holdalls. They waited, red-faced and giggling maniacally. By the time he reached their section of the carriage, they were in paroxysms of laughter, legs kicking up at a private joke.

The inspector raised an eyebrow, his nose wrinkling at the smell of cheap, stale alcohol. He looked at the other passengers, hoping to solicit a complaint. Of the elderly couple, the husband looked as if he were about to speak, before withering in the face of the malevolent glares of the three men. He held his silence as the inspector slowly clipped the tickets and moved on. As soon as the door to the carriage closed behind him, the drinks were brought out again and the revelry re-commenced.

When they finally arrived at London, they left their rubbish scattered across the seats, and cheering, lurched towards the doors, their fellow passengers keeping a wide berth. They blinked in awe at the arches of King Cross St. Pancras station, looking around and pointing in wonder, before finally emerging out onto the bustle

of St. Pancras Road. Aslan was waiting for them by the taxi rank. His long dark curls flapped across his cadaverous, sallow face, as he ran towards them in greeting. After they had finished jesting at his mock leather jacket, they slapped their hands together and made their way to where his dusty blue Audi was double parked. Throwing their bags into the boot, they argued drunkenly about who would sit in the back, until Aslan pressed the horn in impatience. Conceding the front passenger seat to Hakan, they entered the car, faces pressed to the window, peering in wonder at the smoky cocktail of life passing by around them.

Announcing their hunger, they instructed Aslan to find a place to eat. He took them to a small, dimly lit pub, where plates of sizzling Indian food were served by surly waiters, who frequently returned to offer more drinks: a query that was always met in the affirmative. They stayed there for several hours, reminiscing about their youth, and regaling each other with tales of their new lives. Finally, closing time arrived. At the proprietor's entreaty, they slapped a stack of cash into a puddle of beer and grease, stepping out and burping onion and spice into the cold, crisp night air. At this point, Aslan took out some weed and they smoked contemplatively, drawing in the sweet scent in the glare of the streetlights.

As they puffed and let the smoke settle the warm, spicy food in their bellies, it became clear what was needed to round off the evening. A brief conference confirmed they all were of the same mind. Their energy reinforced and appetites whetted, they bundled into the car again and sped off. The vehicle veered dangerously into the middle of the road as Aslan checked his 'phone and steered with one hand, his passengers silent in anticipation.

The ride was short, and excepting a few irate horns blared in their direction, without incident. They parked by some bins in a small square behind a restaurant. Steam billowed out of a rusting pipe, condensing on the windscreen of the Audi. They stomped, hands in pockets, towards a black metal door wedged between a kebab shop and minicab office. A faded sign above the door depicted a Greek goddess, a crack visible from the amphora she carried, travelling all the way across her torso.

A rap on the door by Aslan prompted a slit to open, revealing a fierce pair of eyes. Following a brief introduction, the sound of bolts opening was heard, and the door

yielded to reveal a hard-faced, red-haired woman in her fifties, dressed in a thick black dress, flecked with dust. Upon a bunch of five-pound notes being pressed into her palm, she stepped back to allow the four men inside.

They entered and were immediately frisked by a thick necked bouncer dressed in a long coat. During the search, they looked around them bemusedly, as the after-effects of the marijuana began to level them out. Inspection over, they were led down a narrow staircase into a basement, from where the smell of smoke and stale perfume wafted up to greet them, accompanied by a low steady thud of pop music. A red curved banquette was located for them, with a tiny round black table at the centre. Without them ordering, a bottle of champagne of vague provenance was placed on the wobbling table, along with four wafer thin flutes. The glasses were filled, and a toast raised. Swigging back the cold, cheap liquid, they allowed the buzz from the champagne to flood over them, enveloping them in a warm embrace of contentment.

The flesh came next. They sat for several minutes, staring in a zombie trance at the lithe bodies gyrating on the pole in the centre of the basement. Soon afterwards, additional companions approached their booth, dressed in flimsy clothing, and bearing wan, knowing smiles, framed in lurid, red lipstick. They settled themselves on their laps, writhing suggestively and drawing in their stomachs. They progressed to whispering bland conversation into their ears, making sure to lick the hairy lobes and blow a warm hiss of breath with each utterance.

They allowed themselves to enjoy the rubbing against their groins, whilst continuing to drink and blurt compliments to their newfound admirers. Finally, the mix of lascivious friction, cold alcohol and warm scent persuaded them to clasp the proffered hands that led them into the curtained booths that lined the walls of the basement. Within those enclosures, they grabbed the writhing bodies that arrested their attention for three minutes, then another three, then more, until the demands were met with a beckoning hand for cold, hard cash...

...which eventually ran out. Then came the challenge and the recriminations. The affections were abruptly withdrawn, confusing their insulted senses to such a degree, that the only option was to lash out...which they did.

It wasn't clear who struck first. From one of the booths came a scream which attracted the attention of the others, who came running. Accusations were levelled, money was demanded and refused, further blows were dealt, a blade flashed ... eventually the only option was to leave.

They stumbled out into the night air, which hit them like a cold blow to the front of the head, before diving into their lungs and taking control of their bodily functions. Between the club and the car, they found themselves vomiting against a wall, decorating their shoes with the reeking contents of their guts, whilst they sagged, heaved, and roared. But when they finally rose, the acid biting at their throats, they felt better, so much better, and after all, why shouldn't they? They were kings, from the land of the crescent moon, come to lay waste to this country of the soft, the unsuspecting, the complacent; the land that pretended to welcome, before sneering at and snubbing them, with upturned noses and supercilious glances. Well, they were here to stay, and they would not be trodden underfoot, especially not by one such as that goggle-eyed, beak-nosed freak ...

...but first they needed to recharge, to regain their senses. It had been a good first night, a memorable introduction to this city, that they had heard so much about. But now, as they careered across the desolate roads, with windows rolled down, before arriving at Aslan's home...as they pulled their bags out of the boot and staggered up the concrete steps to the tiny flat...as they ignored their host's drunken orientation and collapsed on the sofa, the bedroom floor, the kitchen floor...now they needed to rest, to sleep, to regain their strength. For tomorrow was a new day, an important day and they had much to do. There were scores to be settled, and a reckoning to be had. They would not allow themselves to be treated that way, and an example needed to be made.

About the Writer

Neel Patel studied at the City of London School and London School of Economics, before qualifying as a chartered accountant, and embarking on a finance career which included spells living in Budapest, Dublin, and New York. He currently lives in London, where he specialises in developing partnerships between the public and private sector, in Europe, the Middle - East and Africa.



A keen writer from an early age, Neel's short story, *A New Lease of Life*, was published in 2018 by the Claret Press in their collection: *Insights: Fifteen Stories Exploring Disability*. His novel, *Tobin and Blake* was longlisted for the Retreat West Novel prize, as well as in multiple categories for the 2021 Page Turner Awards.