

# TLC Showcase

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SARAH CLEMENT

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## Introduction to *A Ton of Feathers*

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A while ago I discovered the evocative words *Understory* and *Overstory*. The understory is the layer of vegetation – flowers, shrubs and small trees – growing beneath the main canopy of a forest. The overstory is the canopy, the leaves and branches of the tall fully-grown trees. There are many ways to tell a story and it can take a long time to discover which vantage point to take. The image of the understory and overstory helped me to think about the relationship between the two manuscripts I have written. The first was an unpublished coming-of-age novel entitled *A Ton of Feathers* and the second is my mental health memoir, *Unblotting*, which my agent has recently sent out on submission.

*A Ton of Feathers* told the fictionalised story of my childhood. An agent asked to see a revised version of the manuscript. Embarking on this second version, excited but unsure about my ideas for changes, I used some savings for a TLC assessment of the new opening three chapters. The feedback from TLC reader, Helen Gordon, provided the confidence and guidance I needed to complete the rewriting. A year later I was awarded the TLC Katherine Orton Bursary for a Free Read, and this enabled me to go back to Helen for her to assess the whole revised manuscript. Again I had agent interest in the manuscript and a further invitation to revise and resubmit it. An extract from the third version of *A Ton of Feathers* was selected for the *TLC/AM Holmes Free Reads Anthology*. Ultimately there were no takers for the novel, but all this close creative interrogation of my childhood was the seedbed for my mental health memoir and successful ending to my long search for an agent.

If my writing was a bird, in *A Ton of Feathers* the bird was wandering through the undergrowth of my remembered childhood, scrutinising each shrub. In my memoir, *Unblotting*, the bird swooped upwards and is hovering above the treetops. Its birdy eye is mostly focused on the overstory's leaves and branches – the psychological troubles that beset me in my thirties and after – but it also catches glimpses of the understory of my childhood and the experiences back then that seeded some of my later difficulties. From this vantage point the understory is smaller than before, with only small bits of it visible, one part of a larger forest of words.

## Extract from *A Ton of Feathers* by Sarah Clement

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From the doorway, it looks as if a flock of baby doves has landed on our coffee table. Mum glances up at me from where she's sitting crossed-legged on the floor. Her face is wet with tears. She unwinds some toilet paper from the roll, wipes her eyes, blows her nose, and puts the screwed-up tissue on the table with the rest.

'What did you do at school today?' she asks.

'The usual.'

'Oh.'

I sit down next to her, close – so she can't think I'm being distant – but not too close.

The crying is part of Getting Her Feelings Out. When she's finished doing this she'll be better. It's taking a very long time.

The other night, when Mum took little Fran out of the bath and I had it all to myself, I closed my eyes and mouth and lay back until the water covered all of me, right to the very edge of my nose. I was thinking about the man Mr Summers told our class about, the one who jumped out of the bath when he realised the amount the water went up was the same as the space inside him. If Mum went under like this and I could see how much the water rose I'd know how big her inside is. And if I found all the hankies and toilet paper and squeezed them out to collect all the tears, maybe, somehow, I could work out how many of her feelings are already out, how many are still inside waiting to come out, and exactly when the crying is going to stop.

At bedtime, the cuddly toys sit on the eiderdown in their groups – the dogs, the bears and the jungle animals – and keep watch in the darkness. Wide awake still, I start to think about Mum. Anger is the most important feeling to get out, she often says. I pull Bonzo close and squeeze him. Mum mostly saves getting her anger out for when she goes to one of her weekends at The Centre. At home, her anger only comes out when she doesn't mean it to, like when Dan and Fran are being bolshie or when we all get under her feet.

'Woe betide you,' she shouts in her too-loud voice. Or 'I'll have your guts for garters,' piercing us with her eyes. So different from the usual Mum. It's like she's a *Scooby Doo* phantom and you can never tell if the phantom's real or just an ordinary person in disguise.

I suck Bonzo's ear.

When Mum goes to The Centre and Dad looks after us all weekend, we wave goodbye to her on a Friday, she drives off in her grey Mini, and comes back on a Sunday after we're in bed. One time we weren't allowed to watch telly for a week because it's in Mum and Dad's bedroom and if we sat on the bed it might hurt Mum. Malcolm who runs The Centre had broken her rib.

'It wasn't his fault,' she said. 'It was an encounter group, he pushed me to make me react and I fell. He was helping me.'

In bed, remembering, I bite the inside of my cheek. There is a taste of blood.

It's not just the crying and being angry, Mum's feelings come out in noises too. Noises that come from my bedroom. I hear them from the landing below. She says she feels safe in my room, but the sounds hang around after she's gone. Sometimes other people are with her and they get their feelings out together. Today Mum's in there on her own. I don't want to be here on the landing, but the noises pulled me upstairs, and now it's like I'm in quicksand and if I move I'll be sucked right under.

There's no name for the noises. It's worse than moaning or groaning. It's almost like wailing. It's not quite shouting. One time it sounded like a scream.

Mum asked me to make a sign saying *Quiet Please* to tell me, Dan and Fran to be quiet so they can make the noises in peace. I picture the sign I made hanging on my doorknob. The letters on it are fat and round, like balloon animals, and every one is a different colour. They're surrounded by splodges, each shape close to the one next to it, but never touching.

A while ago I asked Mum and Dad if I could paint my bedroom the same way. They said yes to one wall, and gave me left-over cans of paint. The colours weren't right

though – *Bottle Green* and *Wedgewood Blue* it said on the tins – and my wall ended up looking like the camouflage army men wear. So Mum and her friends come and sit in front of my camouflage wall, on the raffia matting which makes patterns on your knees, and re-live all the bad things that have ever happened to them.

It's another day and we're sitting on the floor again, me one side of the Habitat table, Mum on the other.

'You know, it all started when you had that dream. The one about the sky falling in.'

I look at her so she knows I'm listening.

'The dream was you remembering your difficult birth. I knew there and then I had to sort myself out and get my feelings out.' She sighs. 'I'd been holding everything in for so long.'

'Oh.'

'And when I'm sorted out, you won't need to go through all the things I've been through.'

'Mmm.' I touch the cool black surface of the table and feel its round corners.

Mum reaches over and strokes my hair. 'It'll help both of us. I'll be better and you'll be better too.'

Better from what? I un-frown my face before Mum notices.

It's easy to remember the dream. I was a small dot under an enormous blue sky, and the sky fell down and down towards me. I screamed. I don't know if the scream was in real life or in the dream.

I wish I'd never told her that dream. I usually take the bad bits out of dreams. Like the time I said I dreamt I was swimming in a lake. I didn't say I was drifting to the edge where the water crashed straight down like Niagara Falls. Whatever I say, Mum goes to the bookshelf, finds her dream dictionary and looks up my half-true

dreams. And the meaning is always the same – I'm *suffering from inner conflict*, I'm feeling *emotionally overwhelmed*, I need to *address my hidden fears*. There's always something wrong with me. Something or other.

On Saturday, we all watch *Dr Who* on Mum and Dad's bed, with the pillows for cushions. Dad puts one arm round Fran and the other round me. Today's episode is called 'Dr Who and the Planet of the Spiders'. Sarah Jane goes to a big house in the countryside and sees a group of men sitting cross-legged, chanting.

'Om-manay-padmay-um, om-manay-padmay-um.'

A huge spider appears in the middle of the circle of men. It shoots out blue electricity which makes one of the men collapse. The spider springs onto the back of another man, it disappears and reappears on his face.

Fran puts her hands over her eyes. I bite my thumbnail and too much nail comes away.

In bed, I pull Bonzo close and squeeze him. I don't want to dream about spiders. Think of something else. Was it really my dream about the sky falling down that made Mum change? Or was she different before that?

Perhaps it was moving here to our new house that made Mum change? It could have been the number seven that did it. It was 1970 when we came here last year and I was seven. Lots of people have seven as their magic number. Not me though, mine is eighty-two, it's so nice and even. Or maybe Mum changed because it's the Age of Aquarius now, like it says in the song she puts on sometimes? On the front of the cassette box there's a man with long hair made up of stars, the sun, hearts and clouds, and the *s-e-x* word is written on his shoulder.

I jump awake in the middle of a dream. An Egyptian mummy with outstretched arms is walking straight towards me. My heart thumps.

At breakfast, I hide behind the Rice Krispies box and think hard. Mum will ask me if I dreamt, she always does. I can't tell her about the scary mummy.

'I dreamt about an enormous spider.'

She fetches her book and reads me the meaning of my made-up dream.

*Spider: the spider symbolises the essential female, the mother. The web represents the danger of entanglement with the mother. A spider dream indicates the dreamer is engaged in a core psychic struggle with the mother figure. This tension is likely to be subconscious which is why it is manifested in dream-form.*

I sit very still and don't say a word.

## About the Writer

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Sarah Clement is an award-winning writer, receiving a London Writers Award in 2021, and a Creative Future Literary Award in 2018. Her work has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and First Pages Prize. Her short stories have been published in *Mechanics Institute Review*, *Liars' League*, *Reflex Fiction*, *The Selkie* and *LossLit* and in the *A Wild and Precious Life* recovery anthology (Unbound). Sarah is a research psychologist by background, and wrote *The Caesarean Experience* (Harper Collins) and edited *Psychological Perspectives on Pregnancy and Childbirth* (Churchill Livingstone). She left academia in 2014, swapping psychology for creative writing and turning her curiosity towards the complexities of her own inner life. She has written a mental health memoir exploring bipolarity, trauma and grief. She is represented by Rukhsana Yasmin at The Good Literary Agency. Devon girl turned Londoner, Sarah lives in South London with her husband and has two adult sons. You can find out more about her on [www.sarahclement.co.uk](http://www.sarahclement.co.uk) and on twitter @sarahclemwrites.

