

TLC SHOWCASE

TLC PEN FACTOR WINNER SPECIAL: PTISSEM ABOURACHID

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Introduction to *The Checklist*

During my time in a women's refuge in 2015, I read up on domestic abuse and slowly realised how so much of what I'd perceived as 'normal' behaviour in my marriage, was in fact abusive. But it didn't look like the abuse I'd seen portrayed in movies and television series growing up. This realisation became the foundation for my women's fiction novel, *The Checklist*, through which I attempt to take the reader on a similar journey of realisation.

The Checklist follows the lives of British-Moroccan best friends Ines and Yasmine, who may as well be entering spinster territory according to some of their Moroccan relatives, due to being 30 and still single. Despite their bad luck navigating the dating world, Ines isn't willing to give up on finding true love, unlike best friend Yasmine, who is tired of getting ghosted and lied to and decides on an arranged marriage instead, leaving Ines horrified. When Yasmine throws away her ideal-husband checklist, it's replaced with a far more sinister checklist that ends up putting both their lives in danger. When Ines is forced to step in and protect her friend, she's unaware of the devastating effect it will have on her own marriage.

Woven in between themes of friendship, love, and self-love, *The Checklist* attempts to gaslight the reader, forcing them to question their own perceptions around what an abusive relationship can look like.

I almost didn't enter TLC Pen Factor. I'd entered other competitions, and after getting nowhere, assumed my writing wasn't quite ready. When the deadline reminder email came through, I realised it would be stupid not to apply, especially with it being open to works in progress. I polished my submission, finding myself in a state of complete disbelief a few weeks later, at the news that I'd been chosen as a finalist.

The feedback from the judges was beyond my wildest dreams. To hear their excitement at where this book could go made me realise that this wasn't just a story that I was writing by myself, with no idea if anyone else would enjoy reading it; it was a story that TLC, the audience, and the judges resonated with and liked enough to choose as their winner, giving me the motivation, validation and now the resources, to power through the edits and try my hardest to get this book out into the world. Thank you, TLC.

Extract from 2023 TLC Pen Factor Winner

The Checklist by Ptissem Abourachid

CHAPTER ONE

INES

I think God is trying to send me a sign, and I'd like to send it back.

This is not what I prayed for. I asked for a soul-mate, not another catfish-creep of a guy that just wasted an hour of my life and a £5 tube fare that I really can't afford.

Was God really trying to tell me to give up?

Where the hell is he?

I let out a heavy sigh and flick my eyes open. Tariq comes back into view, still standing on the platform. He gives me a wave, accompanied by that creepy wink of his. I shake my head. *Why the fuck didn't I sit on the opposite side of the carriage.*

Sensing my frustration, the beeping noise of the tube reassures me of the train's imminent departure, its doors slamming shut, whisking me away from the platform, from Tariq and from yet another disastrous first date.

The heat from my body spreads up my neck and across my face, turning it red. I bring my hair forward, letting it fall across my face, avoiding eye contact with any of the passengers in case they'd also witnessed Tariq lunging at me on the platform, forcing me to recoil and stumble backwards into a group of teenagers. A group of teenagers who didn't even try to hide their amusement, laughing and shouting so that everyone could hear about how courageous my date was for such a short guy.

I turn my gaze upwards and pretend to be absorbed in the tube map. I was silently screaming inside, but on the outside, I was trying my hardest to look calm and poised as though what had happened was no big deal.

The train comes to a stop and welcomes a large crowd of passengers onto the carriage, flooding the remaining seats and standing space, and blocking my face from anyone that could have potentially witnessed my embarrassment.

I relax my shoulders slightly and take a deep breath, finally letting my gaze move down away from the tube map, letting it rest upon the leather satchel the man is carrying in front of me.

Five more stops to Hammersmith. And then I could vent to Yasmine.

Khaltee opens the door, greeting me in a bright blue kaftan. 'Salam, Khaltee,' I say, leaning in to kiss Yasmine's mum on both cheeks, the smell of oil and pastry wafting over me. Yasmine's mum wasn't my real aunt, but she was a Moroccan woman, and my elder, so out of respect she got called Khaltee regardless of whether or not she was actually related to me.

'How are you, Ines?' she says. 'How is your mum? Dad? How are Sara and Hana? Everyone ok?'

'They're great, thank you, Khaltee,' I smile, responding with the same Moroccan etiquette of enquiring about all of her immediate family too.

'Yasmine's upstairs, would you like some tea?'

'Maybe in a little while, thanks.'

I kick off my shoes and walk up the stairs, knocking on Yasmine's door softly before pushing it open.

Yasmine jumps off her bed to greet me. 'Are you ok?' She gives me a look of sympathy before pulling me in for a hug.

I shake my head and drop my handbag on the floor, before walking over to her double bed and collapsing face down onto it. 'It was so bad,' I groan into her pillow.

Yasmine joins me on the bed. I roll over onto my back and exhale loudly, staring at the branch-like patterns on her Artex ceiling.

'Yes, he was about 5'4," no lie. I literally towered over him.'

'What? Hold on a minute, what was his height on his profile?'

'5'10". And he could clearly see on mine that I was 5'9". I was so pissed off.'

'Did you say anything to him?' Yasmine asks, her eyes revealing the extent of the second-hand cringe she was feeling for me.

'Yes!' I exclaim. 'I had to. It was so obvious he'd lied. I just straight-up asked - didn't you say you were 5'10"?''

'What did he say?' Yasmine says, her eyes looking like they might explode from all the cringe.

I prop myself up on my elbows. 'He said, and I quote - *oh, did I say that?*'

'Erm, yes, bitch, you did,' Yasmine says, her cringe turning to disbelief.

'And then he changed the subject and started telling me some random story about living in Dubai, as though it was no big deal,' I say, flopping back onto the bed.

'What did he think was going to happen today?' Yasmine says, looking at me for answers I couldn't give her. 'Did he think he was going to miraculously grow a few inches overnight? Did he think you wouldn't notice?'

I sigh, before sitting up next to Yasmine and leaning back against her headboard. I stare out of her window at the row of white townhouses on the opposite side of the street. 'That wasn't even the worst of it,' I say, rolling my eyes. 'He may as well have been

a catfish, he looked *nothing* like his photos. They were probably taken 10 years ago.'

I tilt my head back towards Yasmine, who looks at me sympathetically whilst playing with her hair, twisting her curls into plaits, before unravelling them, and doing it all again. 'I tried to leave early, but he insisted on walking me to the station and I swear I kept feeling his hand brush against mine along the way.'

'Oh God,' Yasmine says, putting her head in her hands, her long, tight curls falling in front of her and obscuring her face.

'I couldn't even get rid of him at the station,' I continue, the venting slowly relieving me of my frustration. 'He walked me all the way down to the platform, even though he was going on a completely different line...'

'Well, that's actually quite sweet of him, Ines,' Yasmine says, flicking her head back up and interrupting my rant.

About the Writer

Ptisseem is a British-born Moroccan writer, currently writing her debut Own Voices Novel.

Ptisseem worked in sports TV production for over 10 years after graduating from university, before taking a break to raise her two children. She re-trained as a life coach, helping clients to overcome their emotional struggles and challenges and realise their full potential. A journey that she herself had embarked on just a few years earlier, after a particularly challenging time in her own life. Her work as a coach gave her the opportunity to write about themes such as domestic abuse, spirituality and emotional well-being, as well as writing marketing copy for fellow coaches.

This re-ignited her childhood love of writing and storytelling, which coupled with the realisation that people were actually enjoying her writing, inspired her to begin working on her first novel.

Ptisseem has published articles with The Muslim Vibe and Amaliah, and had her six-part memoir series on her own experiences in an abusive marriage published online by the popular Muslim social-media influencer, Dina Tokio. She was accepted onto the Asian Women Write scheme in 2022, and has recently graduated from the Harper Collins Author Academy.

She can be found on Twitter @ptisseem_a



Meet the TLC Pen Factor 2023 Finalists:

Alex Limia

Bio

Alex is an experienced copywriter and editor whose real passion is writing fiction. An alumna of Faber Academy's Writing a Novel course, she is now juggling finishing her manuscript with her day job as a freelance copywriter and her night job as a reader of all the novels she wishes she had written.



Alex Says:

Entering the TLC Pen Factor competition is definitely one of the best things I have done for my novel-in-progress. Just deciding to give it a go really refocused me on my manuscript. Making the final five has been such a confidence boost, and I'm just so grateful for the valuable feedback from the judges.

The Sleepover

The police are called to investigate what appears to be the accidental carbon monoxide poisoning of two 10-year-old girls in a tent in Petra Nash's back garden.

Lonely mother-of-one Petra thought she had found an ally in new neighbour Claire, and a friendship between the women's daughters brings them even closer. But when the girls' sleepover ends in tragedy, friendships and families are shattered as both mothers look for someone to blame.

Extract

Chapter one

"All finished here." The police officer tilts his head towards a colleague who is busy examining his thumbnails in the squad car on Petra's driveway.

Already? Petra doesn't want them to leave, these inscrutable men who have padded around her moss-stuffed lawn in their plastic overshoes. Methodically foraging and documenting, bagging and sketching, they have been obscurely comforting – if only

in retrospect – like white noise.

The moment they leave, she will have to be ready. Their uniformed presence is all that is stopping various neighbours and associated onlookers from advancing onto her turf, eager to exchange a few easy words of concern for a glimpse of this drama on their doorsteps.

Many of these watchers, she gathers from offcuts of conversation, have already been to stand outside Claire's shuttered house in Stockley Road, propping rigid cones of cellophane-swaddled flowers against the side of the porch before pausing to appreciate their own relative good fortune. But they don't know how to conduct themselves here at the epicentre – a brazen hub of activity. The wisdom of the crowd has yet to decide whether Petra, too, qualifies for compassion.

The officer walks away with the ease of an actor leaving the stage. He, of course, can exit this scene and shrug off his role. Professional, objective, he won't break character until he is out of sight.

Who will he be then? she wonders. Out of uniform, will he judge her, too?

Is he a parent? Does he walk his children to school, check their mobile phones, still look in on them as they sleep?

So they had finished. Did he say they would need to come back? He has only taken four strides towards the Battenburg-liveried door of the police car and already she can't remember. The only echo she can summon is her own mechanical, "Thank you." Absurd to say that, but it was all she had to offer. Thankfully, it was lost to the crunch of black patrol boots on gravel.

The car door clunks shut. Both men reach for their seatbelts, saying something to each other. Petra can only guess at their words.

That poor kid had only come for a sleepover.

Imagine that, though, in your own back garden.

She goes inside. The house is quiet. More than that: there is no possibility of noise, as if the scene has been paused. James is still at the hospital with Esme. Even the cats fled when the officers set foot in the hallway. They skittered upstairs, probably to Esme's bed – she never does remember to close her door.

For a moment, it almost seems possible that the police officers were never here. Even as Petra rinses their coffee mugs for the dishwasher, they will be heading back to their ordinary lives as fathers and husbands, ready to stand down and be with their families. They will never forget what they have seen here – scraps will soon be available in the local media anyway – but now they are needed elsewhere.

She decides to wash the mugs in the sink. A few extra minutes, on her own, almost believing that nothing has changed.

Karen Gold

Bio

Karen Gold is a music therapist, psychotherapist and musician who used to be a journalist. She has sung lullabies in six languages, rapped in classrooms, played jazz standards on hospital pianos and survived cymbal-assaults. She lives in Ely, within earshot of military aircraft and cathedral bells.



Karen Says:

It was so valuable to have the chance to see my work through professional agents' and editors' eyes. TLC has been very supportive in helping me see 'next steps' in whatever I have shown them.

Bleeding the Blues

Bleeding the Blues takes the reader on a unique journey into the musical worlds of prisoners, newborn babies, families, people with dementia, autism, mutism and psychosis, to see and hear how therapy with music uplifts, communicates and heals - and why we all need it in our lives.

Extract

From Chapter 9, *Afterglow*

A few weeks later I see Elm again. She is in the second row of the hospice community choir, with an extreme-blonde fundraiser seated on her right and Mavis the indefatigable tea-trolley volunteer on her left. Not a place for a quick getaway.

The choir is for everyone: patients, families, volunteers and staff. It meets on Tuesday lunchtimes. Before we start I throw open the high windows of the big, square, magnolia day-room. 'Shut the windows, people will hear us!' our Finance Officer inevitably calls from the back. Elm swivels round to eye his strangulated tenor. When she turns back to the front, she is still scowling. Her cheeks are rosy. She sees me noticing her and rolls her eyes. Then she winks.

I rap my knuckles on the piano-top, cup my hands together as if inviting these twenty-seven bodies and voices to get into a large bowl of music. The rehearsal begins. We

deep-breathe and stretch arms and legs. We make silly warm-up noises. We hum and yawn and ululate. A few men, mostly women, some old, some young. Four or five drip-stands. The occasional suit and tie. All shoulder to shoulder, some standing, some sitting, some sagging a little. Elm's movements are spry. Her jaw juts forward as she sings.

'Let's yawn again,' I call out. 'Pretend to chew gum. Work those face-muscles. Feel the tension ebb away.'

Our blood flows faster. Our oxygen levels rise. Singing in choirs makes you healthier and happier: the science is there to say so. Choirs boost social connection faster than conversation. A choir is a team in a shared endeavour: breathing together, listening to each other, aiming for the same goal. Endorphins race around the body, muffling pain. People stand straighter, breathe deeper, smile as the brain's success-reward system pumps them with happiness hormones. Minds are focussed, bodies in a state of flow. And all this before you even start singing music.

There's a lift in my conducting arms that doesn't just come from my muscles. It comes from joy. We stamp and clap. We toss our voices in African chants, swirl in easy-listening pop. We divide into parts, mingling notes to make new sounds: richer if less focussed, like combining primary colours. Losing the precision of red, yellow, blue. Gaining sharp orange, sea-green, prissy mauve, earthy brown.

At the start I see individuals. The man with Parkinson's who ripples with Gospel harmonies. The two nurses, always rushing always rushing, always half a beat ahead. As time goes on, I hear the choir as a unit, shading off at the edges in colours, tones and harmonies. A bit smoother on my left. More wayward at the back. Someone drops their music. The person beside them shuffles up to share. At the end everyone applauds everyone else. I mop my brow. Elm is glowing.

Kim Lasky

Bio

Kim Lasky was born on the Essex coast and now lives in Sussex. She currently uses creative approaches to help scientists share research findings in climate, energy, and global justice, and is part of a Sussex-based eco-body, whose writing is inspired from marshlands, woods and streams. *Experiment on a Girl* is her first novel.

www.kimlasky.com



Kim Says:

Being part of the TLC Pen Factor Live Pitch has been just the boost I needed. Spending so long with a world inside your head that seems more real than the 'real' world, it's such a privilege to get a chance to share it with others. The judges were so generous, and the whole experience reminded me how important community is, and that we don't have to write in isolation. It makes such a difference to feel supported!

Experiment on a Girl

Set in a timeless near future, this is a dystopian fiction mixing science and magical realism to explore notions of sickness.

Fenn is a 'Pure', a rare unedited girl on an island where the majority of the population has been modified in some way. But she doesn't know this because she's lived her whole life at Gappe House, in isolation with Quinn, a biohacker on the run from the island's city where the perfectly engineered society proved not to be the utopia it promised. As she turns 16, Fenn must strike out alone to find answers: is Quinn her captor or saviour? What exactly is he planning to do with her?

Extract

When the blast door slams, there's a rush of air. The smell of mould, the dust of dead moths.

I've been locked in the cellar often enough to know what the night will be like. No light. The scratch-scratching of rats, or long-tailed mice, the slow-dying buzz of a fly, or two, or three. Damp at my chest, making me cough.

— *you can cry all night down here, if you must.*

I can't see, because my eyes haven't got used to the dark yet, but I know, because

I've been here before, in darkness, but also in daylight, fetching vegetables, lugging crates up the concrete steps, watching my elbows at the walls, as you tell me to, that there's an old mattress on the floor to my left. Stuffed with down, escaping where the binding has torn, springs showing through. There's a pair of tool-boxes packed with hammers and mallets, dusty trowels, screws rattling in tins. The hand-drill with a turning circular wheel that reminds me of the cogs of a clock. Tumbling out of two concertina lids, both of them marked with your name: Quinn. Tools that built the walls and fences. Tools I might use to hack at the cellar's blown plaster, hear it crumble and fall. There are three empty cardboard boxes, corners eaten by rats, scraps scattered like the sawdust that flies from the drill. A metal bench along one wall. To my right, another blast door, with a step down to a second, smaller room.

The smell of turnips and potatoes, laid up. The smell of the curing, of salt and old ham.

The scullery sits the other side of the wall, washtub waiting, Gappe House stacked overhead: kitchen, parlour, drawing room, dining room, stairs up to the half-landing where the window-catch rattles in the wind. Up again to the bedrooms. To you, asleep in the attic.

Outside, the sea will be churning. Darkness along the empty coast. Darkness in the forest.

My heart thump-thumps, even now, at the word forest. Thumps with the running and the darkness, racks of witches' fingers, roots at my ankles, dragging me down. What's the point in running? It's dangerous the other side of the walls. The city is miles away, far inland, far from the coast that's crumbling into the sea, far from the threat of flood and tsunami. One huge tidal wave and everything's gone, you say, hugging the moonshine close to your chest. Gone. We're lucky Gappe House is still here. Our protection. Who would think of looking for a laboratory in an old abandoned house? Even if anyone came scouting, risked the long trip from the city, they'd see only high walls, mossy, slippery bricks. Ivy grown over the cut-off trunks of diseased trees. Brambles and briars.

Thorns make their own barbed wire, you say. Nettles are their own deterrent.

Trisha Andres

Bio

Trisha Andres is a recent graduate of the MA in Creative Writing (Prose Fiction) at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Prior to this, she was a travel editor at *The Daily Telegraph*. She has written for *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. She is currently a Creative and Critical Writing PhD candidate at UEA and is working on her second novel.



Trisha Says:

I entered the competition and (purposefully) forgot all about it, the same way I do when playing the national lottery. So, it came as a wonderful surprise when I received an email with the words CONGRATULATIONS in the email body, notifying me I was a finalist. The TLC team and industry judges have been incredibly kind. Their support and words of encouragement have inspired in me a renewed love and enthusiasm for my novel and my writing. Thank you for this gift.

To All My Mothers

TO ALL MY MOTHERS is a book club novel about a young photographer and her nanny searching for independence and identity, and is set in 1980s Philippines under a dictatorial regime. The novel examines Filipino identity through storytelling, class, food and mythology, and explores how finding out about the past can redefine the future.

It's for readers who enjoyed the interweaving of the personal and the socio-political in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, with a hint of the upstairs-downstairs world of *The White Lotus*.

Extract

CHAPTER ONE Homecoming

Isabel's father liked to say the first thing he noticed about her was her head, which was as perfectly round as Manang Bola's crystal ball. When he picked her up from her cot in the convent in Manila – and she weeded on his suit with such force it trickled onto his lucky red socks – he knew she was the one. He and his wife, Henny, took her home the

same day. A week later, she was christened Isabel Darna Alexandra, and became their only daughter.

They lived in a plantation-style house on McKinley Road, nestled within Forbes Park, a gated village dotted with several ambassadors' residences. There was a playground with swings and slides, and a row of palm trees that shielded the security guards from the harsh sun as they patrolled the neighbourhood on motorbikes. At four o'clock every day, Isabel listened for the ding-a-ling of the ice cream man's approach and, at six o'clock, the chorus of church bells.

These memories overflowed Isabel's thoughts on her first day back in Manila. It was hot and brooding, and she thought of the airy studio she'd left behind at Central Saint Martins. Her bedroom balcony was awash with light, but the stone floor felt damp beneath her bare feet. On the street below, a queue of mismatched vehicles crept and lurched along McKinley Road: yellow taxis with 'Air-Con' spray-painted across one side and buses in purples and oranges, steel bonnets deflecting the morning's sun. And with this came a cacophony of familiar sounds: the honking of jeepneys, but also the whirring of the neighbour's water tank and a man selling cassava cakes outside the village gates bellowing at the top of his lungs, 'Puto at kutsinta.' Diesel fumes and dry heat laced the air.

To the left of the house, in the relative cool and quiet of the Thai Ambassador's shaded front garden, the twin boys scampered across the grass. The last time Isabel had seen them, they were in nappies; now, three years later, they leap-frogged over a row of stone elephants arranged across the lawn and yelled at each other in Thai. Isabel eased her hand into her satchel, slipped out her camera – an old Leica – and trained it against her eye. The younger boy wearing blue shorts waved, prompting his older brother to turn around. On seeing Isabel, he saluted. *Click*.

Raindrops slid from the roof like transparent beads. Through her camera's viewfinder, Isabel noted that, behind the boys, the sage green walls of the summerhouse her mother had painted were still there. Faded.

Isabel wasn't the only one noticing their home's changing face. Her childhood best friend, Maya, had reported strange shifts in Isabel's mother's behaviour. Mum had been acting odd, according to Maya, coming home late at night, sometimes not returning at all. And she'd been spending curious amounts of time with an unknown woman from the Embassy. This was why Isabel had come home a month earlier than planned.

'Breakfast's ready!' Josie, Maya's mother, called up.

Isabel descended the stairs and spotted Mum at the table, eyes down, pushing her scrambled eggs to the side of her plate. It was unlike her to forget her manners. She could have been a headmistress at a finishing school in the unyielding way she made

them wait for everyone to be seated before starting, and reminded them never to overfill their plates – ‘after all, we are not pigs at a trough,’ she’d say.

When Josie saw Isabel, she patted the seat next to Mum and smiled. It’d been a year since they’d last seen each other and Isabel was pleased to see Josie, whose warming presence had a special way of making everything better.

‘Come, come, I’ve made you champorado,’ Josie said.

Isabel knew there was no saying no to Josie. She was as persistent as the monsoon rains and, having raised Isabel, had a hold over her almost as much as Mum did.

‘You know you want some champorado. Makes you stronger and sexier.’ She pinched Isabel’s cheek and winked.