



TLC SHOWCASE

JESSICA IRENA SMITH

Introduction to the manuscript	2
Extract from <i>The Summer She Vanished</i>	3
About the Writer	5

Introduction to *The Summer She Vanished*

After graduating in 2009 and becoming a self-employed glass artist, I decided I needed a fallback plan (how naïve!), so began writing a middle-grade children's novel, inspired by my time at the National Glass Centre. After several years of writing, though, and a few close calls when it came to finding representation, I was almost ready to give up. Not only that, but I'd sworn if I didn't get anywhere with my children's manuscript, I'd never write again. Then, in 2018, having taken on a part-time job the previous year alongside my glass work, and inspired by Netflix's *The Keepers*, I had the idea for *The Summer She Vanished*, so began writing again. Whilst with my children's novel I'd gone with the old adage 'write what you know' – I'd written about the world of glass-blowing, albeit it with a generous sprinkling of artistic licence – with *The Summer She Vanished*, my first attempt at adult fiction, I decided to change tack and go with 'write what you love'. For me, that was something dark and twisting.

After receiving a TLC 'Free Read' for my children's manuscript in 2017, awarded by New Writing North, in 2018 I was invited to submit for the TLC/AM Heath *Free Reads: an Anthology*, for which I was lucky enough to have an extract from *The Summer She Vanished* (formerly *Minna Lies*) selected; and at the start of 2020, *The Summer She Vanished* was also long-listed for Mslexia's Novel Competition. After that, in the summer of the same year, I found representation with Marina de Pass at The Soho Agency, and signed a two-book deal with Headline in 2022.

Set between 1972 and 2016, *The Summer She Vanished* tells the story of a missing teen, a murdered nun, and the dark secret that connects them.

Extract from *The Summer She Vanished* by Jessica Irena Smith

On the first page was a photo of the Larson siblings, veiled by a layer of tissue. I peeled it back. The photo was a colour shot with the unmistakable tones of the 1970s, that golden aura, a sort of overexposed, sunshiny hue.

There they stood in order of age: teenage Walter, William and John Junior, together with the baby of the family, my mom, Barbara, a beautiful little doll no more than nine or ten years old. They stood posed on a metal swing set, a lanky Walter leaning nonchalantly against the frame, William, JJ and Mom each seated on a swing. The hairstyles and the clothes! I couldn't help but smile: bell-bottoms (Walt and William) and too-tight shorts (Uncle JJ), pudding-basin haircuts (all the boys) and jam-jar spectacles (poor JJ again). Despite this, they were a good-looking bunch: blonde, blue-eyed, with goofy gap-toothed smiles, my mom sun-kissed and freckled, neat and tidy in her smocked dress and Mary-Janes, her brothers brown as berries.

What struck me most about the picture, though, was how happy they looked. Mom especially. I'd never seen her like this before, I realised – so carefree. It made me ache. She wasn't someone who was prone to smiling, not naturally. Yes, she'd smile when she met people, just as she would when she was trying to get her own way, batting her eyelashes, tilting her head at just the right angle. That was how she'd attracted Bob. That and her looks, I was certain of it. But spontaneous, genuine smiling? No, not my mom.

Unable to look at their beaming faces any longer, about to snap the album cover shut, I stopped, noticing that the thin white border – the type many older photos had – was missing on the right-hand side. I slipped the picture gently from its fixings and found that it had been folded, hiding three or four centimetres. Unfolding it carefully, I smoothed it out, and gasped. On the other side of the swing set from Uncle Walt, the two of them bookending the three youngsters in the middle, was a girl no more than sixteen or seventeen. She stood at a slight distance – not quite part of the gang – but resembled the others so much, Mom especially, that she couldn't *not* be related. But where Mom was petite, fragile-looking, this girl was long-limbed and tanned, with a sort of natural, wholesome beauty that not even my mom – with all her salon visits, her primping and her make-up – could compete with. The sort of lazy beauty she resented in others.

What struck me most, though, made the hair on my arms stand on end, was not how much the girl resembled the Larson siblings, but how much she looked like *me*. Her blonde hair was longer than mine, straighter too, centre-parted as seventies fashion dictated. But apart from that, we were almost identical: same features, same build, same skin tone. And those eyes, those dark brown eyes – *my* brown eyes – the only feature I didn't get from Mom.

I studied the image more closely. There was something else too, something not right. It wasn't just that my mom and her brothers were *physically* closer, arranged next to one another; it was more like there was an invisible barrier separating them from the girl, accentuated by the photo's stark white fold-line. It was the girl's expression that jarred most, though: sullen, unsmiling. Her head was slightly downcast, but her gaze was focused upwards, not *at* the camera, but straight through its lens. What was it, that look? Resentment? Hostility?

Fear?

I shook my head. I was reading too much into it, like I always did. Chasing shadows. Looking for a story where there wasn't one. Whoever she was, this girl, she was probably just a typical moody teenager. I was sure there must be a few photos of me from my teens where I looked like I'd rather be anywhere else. I flipped the picture over. *Summer 1972* was written on the back in faded blue ink. That would make my mom ten. I put the photo down and began to rake through the loose ones again, the other albums, too, determined to find the mystery girl. I flipped through photo after photo, page after page, but there was no trace of her, but for the occasional blank space in the albums – paler, ghost-like squares, flanked by empty photo corners.

Spaces where photos once lived.

About the Writer

Jessica has a BA in Glass & Ceramics and an MA in Glass, both from the University of Sunderland, based at the National Glass Centre. She has worked as a glass artist, selling online and through galleries, since 2009, when she also began writing. Jessica's writing is inspired by many things, but she loves podcasts, especially true crime, which she listens to while cutting glass and loading kilns.

In 2016, Jessica won a Northern Writers' Award; in 2017, she was awarded a TLC 'Free Read' by New Writing North; in 2019, an extract from *The Summer She Vanished* (formerly *Minna Lies*) was featured in the TLC/AM Heath-sponsored *Free Reads: an Anthology*; and in 2020, she was long-listed for Mslexia's Novel Competition, and was also one of fifteen writers chosen to attend David Higham's Underrepresented Writers' Open Day.

Jessica lives in the north east of England with her cat and epileptic rescue chihuahua. *The Summer She Vanished*, published June 2023, is her debut novel.

