



## TLC SHOWCASE

### KHATIJA BALU

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## Introduction to *Lewis Didn't Fall*

Winning the TLC Free Reads Award in 2022 from New Writing North put me in touch with TLC; I'd just completed an MA in Creative Writing, and what I gave to TLC was a "skeleton" of my debut thriller novel, titled *Lewis Didn't Fall*.

*Lewis Didn't Fall* is a murder-mystery thriller for Teen/YA readers, set in a British comprehensive school. With a South-Asian protagonist thrown into a relentless investigation to find a murderer, the manuscript submitted to TLC was initially a couple of building blocks that needed a blueprint to develop into a fleshed-out, more developed version of itself.

Come September 2022, I'd submitted my completed manuscript for appraisal with TLC. I'd received feedback from a reader that understood my creative endeavours with choosing to write it as a teen/YA novel. They pointed out what editing is meant to add to a manuscript I thought had to be meticulously constructed - putting specific emphasis on "feeling, drive, and complexity" to deliver the emotional consequences of those twists and turns in my story. Language and logistics were equally important - rather than getting lost in the complexities of a murder-mystery with over-complicated language, I needed to take a step back and look at everything happening around the crime aspect of the manuscript - the characters, the emotions, and the world.

With the appraisal, I could start "building the house" - metaphorically speaking. Editing is seen as a difficult undertaking to achieve a flawless, faultless manuscript, or close to that. A "kill your darlings" approach that can change the trajectory of a story - but my appraisal taught me otherwise. It's true that the latest version of the manuscript is vastly different from my first draft - ironically, it didn't feel like I was killing any of my darlings. It helped that the approach my appraiser suggested was to think that editing is a way of making your writing more sharp, and more capable, of meeting its desired ends.

By March 2023, I'd signed with a literary agent. I've spent a year on-and-off getting the manuscript ready for submission. The advice I've carried with me since my appraisal is that the best thing to do with writing (and editing) is to take a step back and rediscover why you've chosen these characters, these events, and what brings them together, rather than how to write them - more often, simplicity is key!

## Extract from *Lewis Didn't Fall* by Khatijah Balu

They decided he fell.

It makes sense now. Walking to the school and seeing it from this distance shows how high that drop is. A four-storey, thirty-foot imaginary line runs vertically against the building. I'm drawn to the partition that separates this area from the rest of Strytham.

There's no denying that time has run its zig-zagged course at Strytham High. Flowers tied to the fence look dry, no longer stiff and vigilant. I find myself riding the wave of brightly striped cars lining the gates. Behind those cars is an enormous banner, the caption underneath it reads '*THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS BEGIN WITH EXPERT TEACHING - LET YOUR CHILD FLOURISH - PLACES AVAILABLE.*' Behind the fences, a caretaker places a set of cones around the jet-washed patches of bleach on the ground. I'm standing in the middle of it. Staring. Thinking the same thing over and over, again.

*They decided he fell.*

'Should we go back?' My Bawa's voice cuts into the silence, and he nudges my shoulder.

'We just started walking, Bawa.' The answer's lost on him, because he turns on his heels and starts to make his way back down the hill. There's no point in trying to change his mind. These daily walks are supposed to be therapeutic after the amount of stress Bawa's been under lately, but there's only so much of Strytham Road we can walk before we end up back where we are now. At Strytham High.

We take the slow route down the main street, past the Asian wear and chai shop, *nashta*-diner and jewellers. In the distance sits the town hall tower and the Cathedral spire, and the block of council flats. The memories hit me like a flash flood, like how I used to play *knock, door, run* with Bawa's next door neighbour when I'd visit on Eid.

My dad is waiting by the doors of Bawa's shop in bleach-stained joggers. A few months ago, he wouldn't dream of wearing anything other than a three-piece suit for his swanky accountancy gigs. But then his last company in Milton Keynes made him redundant, and Bawa's health problems occurred not long after.

'That was quick. Whereabouts did you go today?' Dad asks. When I hesitate, he takes out his tasbeeh and starts counting. It's the first sign he's about to go into "kitten

overdrive,” a state of intense praying and panic where he starts assuming the craziest things.

I can hear my Bawa’s eyes rolling as he pushes past Dad. ‘Aaayh. We fine. She knows which road to take to school. My heart fine.’ With that, he disappears inside the shop. Dad throws his sponge into one of the many buckets surrounding him.

‘What’s with the shutters?’

He winces. ‘I’m trying to scrub them.’

‘Why? What’s on them?’

Dad musters the strength to pull down the metal shutter covering the windows of Bawa’s shop, only there happens to be a penis on it. I stifle a laugh, watching Dad pull the hair from his scalp, his voice grating against his teeth. ‘I’ve been here two hours now. I don’t know how, but it’s becoming...brighter. Your Bawa said it appeared last night. Said it would be easy to wash off.’ Dad wipes his forehead, taking a moment to rest his palms on his knees.

‘I would’ve helped.’

‘You were taking too long with your therapy walk. It doesn’t come off, you know. No matter how much I scrub, it doesn’t come off.’

‘Well, the human body is meant to be sturdy, Dad. You wouldn’t have me if it came off. Bawa’s messing with you. That’s been there for a couple of years now.’

Dad pushes me into the shop where half the shelving is missing. It’s all part of Dad’s plan to rebrand the shop as a family business. It seems like a real possibility - if Bawa would let Dad close the shop for a few months, but ‘*The Convenience Store*’ has never closed its shutters for more than a day. Not for birthdays or holidays. Not for Dadima’s funeral, or when Bawa was in the middle of his heart attack. Bawa didn’t have anyone else to run the place because his last shop hand, Junaid, left for uni ten years ago, and Bawa never thought to replace him.

‘You! Ahiya aa badhu shu tie ramyun che?’ Bawa says, popping out from behind a heap of old rusted shelving.

‘Dad, tame kem bed ma nathi?’ Dad says with a clenched jaw.

‘Why should I be in bed? This is my shop. Not my bedroom,’ Bawa retorts, forcing a wink from his lazy eye. ‘She finds it funny. I don’t know what happened to you.’

'They say sarcasm skips a generation, Bawa. Is he your son?'

'He is not my son. A son would visit their parents. Would keep his job. You...you've come for my shop. My house. My penny sweets.'

'The penny sweets? That's low.'

Dad's face creases into lines and lines of frowns. Bawa and Dad have never seen eye-to-eye, and each conversation is like adding a chilli to a pan of spitting oil. With the addition of Bawa's new health regime enforced by the doctors, and Dad's tendency to panic, the shop is becoming a battleground for their arguments.

'Oi, don't you start. Dad, *bed ma jaine shui jawo*, you're going to make yourself ill again,' Dad says, forcing a weak smile. Bawa pulls a face as he scurries upstairs, and Dad is kicking the old shelving into the kitchenette when he turns to me. 'Twenty minutes till closing time, think you can handle the odd customer whilst I sort this out?'

Dad doesn't need to ask twice. I settle behind the counter to start my so-called evening shift. No one comes in after the midday rush, so it's mainly guarding the chocolate stand rather than serving customers until closing time. Still, the novelty of being a shop-hand hasn't worn off. If these past two weeks have taught me anything, it's that teens are not at all that different from the *desi* aunties of the neighbourhood, from their complete lack of manners to the fact that they're always attempting to nab a few penny sweets.

Around five minutes before six, the shop bell chimes; a boy around my age stands in front of me, before ducking into the cleaner side of the shop. He swipes a can of *Pepsi* from the fridge with a packet of *Doritos* and places them onto the counter.

'Not prying, but...where's Uncle?' He says. *Uncle*, and he means Bawa. My Bawa, and hearing him call my Bawa *Uncle* sounds weird.

But no one calls Bawa *Uncle* unless he has asked them, so he must be one of Bawa's regulars. Bawa has talked about his loyal customers aplenty, but I've heard nothing about a boy with sky-high fades and a devilish smile.

'Oh, he's been told to take it easy. Perks of a heart bypass,' I say. He nods in return, careful not to catch my eye. 'He's okay, though, well he's still here, so...'

The boy nods again, a look of concern forming on his face as his eyebrows crease. There's been a lot of worry regarding Bawa's condition. He's somewhat of a celebrity on Strytham Road, which we've come to realise in the two weeks we've been here. I could

call Bawa down instead, but I have a feeling Dad might just give birth to more kittens if he sees this boy.

'He's fine.' I add as he's heading towards the door. He says nothing. Not even a *goodbye*, or a *sorry* as he barges past my incoming mum. She waits until he's outside to tut in her usual mum-fashion.

'How was work?'

She winces. 'Nothing glamorous, unfortunately.' Since we moved to Blackburn, my mum has been travelling around the North-West as a freelance accountant for small businesses.. She wanted Bawa to live with us after his heart attack. Still, I'm not sure how she feels about living with Bawa instead. She flips the *open* sign to *closed*, signalling the end of my shift. 'Time for chai, maybe?'

I settle the tray of cups and the steel kettle onto the kitchenette table. Dad is doing what he does every chai-time, spreading vast amounts of butter on his toast and spooning five sugars into his chai before letting the troubling thoughts of high cholesterol settle in. It's too late to be drinking chai if I need to be up early tomorrow, but after two weeks of unpacking and putting those last boxes away, we have to find time to talk about it.

About Strytham.

'So...Strytham.' I say as we huddle around Bawa's tiny kitchenette table. Bawa's upstairs, probably pretending to sleep.

It's Dad who clears his throat. 'They concluded the investigation, didn't they?' The *investigation*. About the boy who fell from Strytham's roof during the Open Evening in September. Lewis Cunningham. The police reckoned he made his way to the roof to vape or something, but they found him on the grounds near the car park. And fifteen minutes after that, he died in the ambulance from a cardiac arrest.

## About the Writer

Khatijah Balu is a writer from the North-West of England, and lives in the town of Blackburn, Lancashire. In 2022, she won a Northern Writers Award - The TLC Free Reads Award. Most of all, she is passionate about creating stories about everyday youngsters - whether that be going to a comprehensive school or working a part-time job whilst studying. As a Teen/YA author, she wants her writing to encapsulate the often overlooked, under-represented upbringing as South-Asian, its highs and lows - mixed in with something else, whether that be murder, thriller or a bit of betrayal.

Currently, she is focusing on writing a standalone thriller, as well as working on expanding the universe of *Lewis Didn't Fall* (which her agent is eagerly getting ready to send to publishers). When she isn't writing, she can be found indulging in a good story in any form (point and click detective games are her speciality), or chasing her indoor cat around the street. She holds a Bachelor and Master's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing from Lancaster University, and currently works as a Disability Work Mentor for a charity that specialises in nurturing young adults with special needs.

