



TLC SHOWCASE

Shere Ross

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Introduction to *Games & Optics*

TLC's Chapter & Verse development programme focuses on technical aspects of writing while supporting writers holistically. During the scheme, I attended workshops and sessions on topics such as self-care for creatives, coaching, and mechanics of the publishing industry. The flexibility of accessing sessions on demand or in person was a major advantage. Much of the support I received was brilliantly orchestrated by Joe Sedgwick. I was mentored by Lizzy Attree, who provided considered and constructive feedback. Jacob Ross, author and assistant editor at Peepal Tree Press, also read my work—his attention to detail, guidance, and encouragement were invaluable.

Below is an excerpt from work developed while I was on the programme.

Extract from *Games & Optics*

Yara Sweeney sat on a Southern Rail train facing her six-year old daughter Mali, as the packed station platform at Clapham Junction slid into view. The unseasonably warm Sunday morning had flushed people into the streets like ants from the earth after heavy rain. An army of football fans in red and blue shirts swarmed the platform, so Yara was glad she'd left home when she did—at least she and Mali had seats. As the football fans boarded she hoped they'd lay off the chanting and the unwelcome banter, but what were the odds of that?

Arriving in the UK aged fourteen from Montserrat, Yara hadn't understood why other train passengers didn't flinch or flee the train, when crowds of footy fans had started, sing-shouting, rough-hugging, swearing, meek-passenger-goading, finger-in-the-air-jabbing, while stinking of beer and that was on a good day when their team hadn't lost.

Mali, dressed in a khaki cap-sleeve jumpsuit (heaven help them come toilet time!), gazed through the window not reacting to anything. She'd been quiet since they'd left the house, so hoping to draw her out of silence, Yara tapped Mali's knee and said, 'What shall we play?'

'Nothing!' said Mali flatly, eyes stuck to the backyards of the terraced-houses outside the window.

'Four more stops,' Yara said.

Mali shrugged. Yara didn't want Mali playing on the phone this early so she said, 'I spy?' trying again.

'That's boring!' Mali snapped. 'You always say, "tree", "people", or "Mali!"' This was true, but it stung to know Mali had already cracked the code of Yara's distraction tactics. Worse though, Yara agreed with Mali that she could have been more inspired with these games, more present when they played them and less keen to browse news apps for her work after just a few minutes of play.

Seconds later Mali sat forward. 'Mummy?'

'Yes, baby.'

'Can I play Roblox?' Mali sounded brighter. 'I won't play for long and run down your battery. *Pleeeeeease!*'

'Umm...How about later?' said Yara dropping and firming her voice, so Mali would know this wasn't really a suggestion. Mali rolled her eyes, leaned back and began drumming her fingers on the window.

They pulled into the next station. 'Bal-ham,' read Mali haltingly, tracing the word on the window with a finger.

'Well done!' said Yara.

Mali breathed on the window then traced a curvy 'm' into the condensation. 'Am I a good girl?' she asked.

'Yes! Of course darling! Why?'

Mali rubbed out the ghostly 'm' with the edge of her fist. 'Daddy always says, be a good girl and I'll see you next week. I am, then he doesn't come.'

'Well...you're my best girl,' Yara said. She rubbed Mali's knee, feeling winded, but smiled through it. Mali resumed gazing out the window, sucked on her bottom lip and nodded.

Yara had ended the relationship with Mali's dad five months ago, and still she rarely had good answers to the questions her daughter asked about the situation. He'd cancelled on Mali again this morning and blamed it on constituency work, but in the background Yara heard a woman laughing who was clearly distracting him so Yara hung up, knowing he wouldn't have the balls to call back.

His call today triggered a fantasy Yara had been refining lately: One day, after taking Mali to Montessori school, Yara could:

While wearing a dark hooded tracksuit, divert to Kilburn Underground station where he now parks his car during office hours (*Thanks vehicle tracker app!*)

Walk under the blue bridge with 'METROPOLITAN RAILWAY 1914' stretched luxuriantly across it, thankfully now lined with bird spikes instead of pigeons.

Play track one of Jazmine Sullivan's *Fearless on her phone* through her Beats earphones

Check for passersby and street cameras added since she last staked out the area

Take his gardening shears and fork from the tangle in her hobo bag

Using a Metro newspaper as cover, stab the front kerbside tyre, for the string of lies he must have told her since it began. (After, survey the 1930s art deco mansion block opposite for anyone who may be watching her.)

Repeat the attack on the rear kerbside tyre, for letting her find out in a way that deprived her of even a moment of blissful denial.

Scan the street for witnesses but act as though looking out for a friend she's due to meet up with.

Take the gardening fork and bear claw the car's paintwork for forcing her to explain to Mali what Yara could barely understand herself.

Pocket the shears and fork until finding a bin, then walk off quicktime, before some clever dick records her on their phone!

Skip forward to the stomping chorus of Dream Big to power her legs as she flees the scene and substantially increases her step count in the process. Job done!

Then back to her home office in the loft, to freelance for whichever news outlets needed content that week.

It would likely never be more than a fantasy, but every time she thought of it, it warmed her like brandy on a cold day.

About the Writer

Shere Ross is a fiction writer based in the United Kingdom. She is a winner of the Novel Studio Competition and the Serendipity Arts Institute's BlackInk Writing Competition. Her writing has been longlisted and shortlisted for several international prizes including The Queen Mary Wasafiri New Writing Prize.



Her writing to date, based primarily in contemporary settings which spotlights relationship dynamics, agency as well as intersectionality, has been published in literary journals with a global focus.

She studied creative writing at the University of London and at the Writing Room London.