TLC Showcase

Sarah Butler

Introduction

I was lucky enough to be offered a 'free read' from TLC via Spread the Word. I had just done a significant restructure of my novel (which I had been working on for the previous 4 years) and the TLC read was a brilliant opportunity to get detailed and useful feedback before sending it back to a contact I had at Picador. Because I was in a position to approach Picador directly, rather than through an agent, I knew I had to get my final draft spot on before sending it to them. Evie Wyld's report was comprehensive and thought provoking. It was so useful to have a fresh pair of eyes on the novel and the process of thinking through Evie's advice and deciding what I wanted to change, and what I didn't, was a hugely valuable one that strengthened my understanding of the novel and what I wanted it to be.

Introduction to the extract:

Ten Things I've Learnt About Love tells the story of Alice and Daniel.

Alice has just returned to London from months of travelling abroad. She is late to hear the news that her father is dying, and arrives at the family home only just in time to say goodbye.

Daniel hasn't had a roof over his head for years, but to him the city of London feels like home in a way that no bricks and mortar ever did. He spends every day searching for his daughter; the daughter he has never met. Until now . . .

Heart-wrenching and life-affirming, *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love* is a unique story of love lost and found, of rootlessness and homecoming and the power of the ties that bind.

Here are the first three chapters of the novel.

Extract from *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love*

by Sarah Butler

Ten things I will say to my father

1. I met a man in Singapore who smelt like you – cigarette smoke and suede.

2. I remember that holiday in Greece – endless ruins, and you having to explain the difference between Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns again and again.

3. I wish you'd talked about Mama. I wish you'd kept something of hers.

4. I still have the book you bought me for my tenth birthday, when I wanted to be an astronaut – *A Tour Through the Solar System.*

5. I know you always hoped one of us would be a doctor, like you.

6. I have a recurring dream. I am standing outside your house. There's a party; I can hear people talking and laughing inside. I ring the doorbell, and it takes you forever to answer.

7. It was me who stole the photograph from your study.

8. I used to spy on you – watch you gardening or sitting in your armchair, or at your desk with your back to the door. I always wanted you to turn around and see me.

9. I'm sorry I haven't been about much.

10. Please, don't—

My father lives on his own in a haughty terraced house near Hampstead Heath. The houses round there are smug and fat, their tiled drives like long expensive tongues, their garden walls just high enough to stop people from seeing in. It's all bay windows and heavy curtains, clematis and wisteria.

I queue for a taxi outside Arrivals and smoke three cigarettes while I wait. When it's finally my turn, I duck into the car and find myself dizzy and sick with the nicotine. The driver plays Mozart's Requiem. I want to ask her to turn it off, but I can't think how to explain, so I stretch my legs into the space where my rucksack should be, rest my head against the door frame, and close my eyes. I try to remember the exact colour of my bag: it's a sort of dirty navy blue – I've been carrying it around for years; I should know what colour it is. Inside there are jeans, shorts, vest-tops, a waterproof coat. Ten packets of Russian cigarettes. A pair of embroidered slippers for Tilly. Mascara. A lipgloss that's nearly finished. An almost perfectly spherical stone, which I'd picked up to give to Kal, and then cursed myself for crying. An unused Rough Guide to India. A head-torch. A photograph of all of us, including my mother, from before I can remember: that's the only thing I'd be sorry to lose.

We arrive too soon. I pay the driver and step out onto the pavement. As she pulls away from the kerb I want to hold out a hand and say, stop, I've changed my mind, let's go somewhere else, anywhere else, and then sit in the back seat again with time on hold, and watch London through the window.

There are eleven steps up to my father's house. At the bottom, two sickly-looking trees stand in chubby blue-glazed pots. A huge bay tree obscures most of the front window, but still I look for him, sitting on the sofa, a cigarette curling itself into ash in one hand. He's not there. My stomach aches; my mouth tastes of sawdust and sleep. I pull a leaf from one of the trees in the pots – freckled a pale yellow-green – and tear along the length of its spine.

My father's front door is painted a dark red-brown, like blood that's been left to dry. Two tall panes of wrinkled glass – bordered by delicate green ivy – reveal nothing

much of what's inside.

When I was thirteen he sent me to school in Dorset. I remember coming home after the first term. He'd had to work, so Tilly picked me up, her fingers nervous at the wheel, her crisp new driving licence stowed in the glove compartment. I stood on the top step, looking at the same brass doorbell I am looking at now, while Tilly scrabbled about for her keys. I thought how the door didn't look like our front door, and pressed the bell to see what it sounded like from the outside.

I take a cigarette from my pocket, even though there's no time to waste. The lighter scratches at my thumb. I inhale too quickly, and cough – a thin, smoker's cough – my hand against my chest.

Ten ways other people might describe me

1. Tramp.

2. Bum.

3. Homeless.

4. Down on my luck.

5. Rough sleeper.

6. Dispossessed.

7. Scum.

8. Marginalised.

9. Misunderstood.

10. Lost.

I'm an old man with a dodgy heart, there's no two ways about it. And the truth is I'm more at home here – at the edge of the river, where's there's mud and mess – than in fancy squares like that one by the Tube, with its flashy screens and security guards.

I move around. It's as close as I get to any kind of a strategy. Each place, I imagine you. I don't have much to go on, though there are things I can guess – hair colour, height, age. And I know your name; I could call to you and watch you turn. We'd stand here and let the cyclists hurry by, listen to the barges knock together like bells, and we'd talk.

Last week, when I thought I was dying, all I could focus on was you. It's not easy to focus on anything when you feel like there's a grown man sitting on your ribcage, but you pulled me through – you always have.

It happened upstream from here, on the Embankment, opposite the Houses of Parliament: the bit by the hospital, with the high wall, where the ends of the benches are carved into birds' faces, sat up on piles of bricks so you can see across the river. I was walking west, with a vague plan to go as far as Albert Bridge, find a place for the night in a quiet Chelsea corner. The police are tricky there, but if you tuck yourself away, sometimes they'll leave you be. I was just walking. The doctor said emotional upset can bring it on, but I'm not sure I was upset that day, not particularly.

I stood against the wall and held both hands to my chest, tears in my eyes like I was a kid, not a man approaching sixty who can survive on the street. I hope if you'd been there, you'd have stopped and asked if I was OK, but you weren't, and anyway I'm used to people paying no attention. I stood and looked at the river, and I thought about you, and how for all I know you're dead already. The world's full of danger, after all. Car crashes. Knives. Blood clots. Cancer. I carried on looking at the river, thinking about what could have been, and scared I was going to drop dead any minute. I suppose it's not surprising that I lost it; I don't mean screaming and

shouting – that's not my way, and in any case when you live like I do it's what they call circumspect to keep your head down. No, I just blubbed like a baby.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not always like this. I like a drink and a banter. I like lying on the pavement and looking up at the stars. It's just that I thought I was having a heart attack; I thought I was going to die without finding you.

I thought about her too, with her scarlet name. We went away once – a weekend in Brighton – snatched time; perfect. We ate ice cream, and fish and chips. We – it feels wrong to say this to you – but we made love in a run-down hotel with a view of the sea.

I'm lying when I say it was perfect. It was grey and dreary. I let myself get angry: hard words in a borrowed room. That way her eyes would click shut and her lips would harden. I suppose it was difficult for her too.

Once I've fallen in love, I find it almost impossible to get out; I've learnt that about myself. It doesn't make for an easy life.

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I'm not one for doctors, but after all that, on the Embankment, I made myself go. The surgery smelt of new carpets – sweet and sharp. I sat next to a woman in her forties and she stood up and moved to the other side of the room. I try not to let things like that bother me. I picked up a pile of newspapers and started to look for you. Nothing.

The doctor's name was the colour of sun-warmed sandstone. She had kind eyes, and her hands, when she touched me, were soft and cool. It's natural to be upset, she said, it's frightening; the first time, everyone thinks they're going to die. I cried again, there in her tiny room with the bed with a paper sheet stretched across it. She

smiled, and gave me a tissue. It was as much her touch as the business with my heart, or the woman in the waiting room, that got me, and I suspect she knew it. She asked me all the questions doctors ask of a man like me, which, I find, are never the questions that matter.

She gave it a name: angina, ice-cold blue, beginning and end. She showed me a tiny red bottle and told me it would help – a quick spray underneath my tongue and I wouldn't be left pressed against a wall, clutching my chest. I took the prescription and left. And I carried on doing what I've been doing for years. I have written your name more times than I can remember. Always, at the beginning, I write your name.

Ten things I know about my mother

1. Her name was Julianne – pronounced like she was French, except she wasn't.

2. She was beautiful (I found a photograph in my father's study, of the two of them and the three of us. I'm holding her hand and gazing up at her. I took it when I went away to school and he never mentioned it. It is in my rucksack, which is lost).

3. I have the same colour hair she had.

4. My father loved her – he's never found anyone else.

5. She didn't always think before she acted. I know this because when I was fourteen I climbed a tree on Hampstead Heath wearing flimsy shoes with no grip. I went too high, fell, and broke my leg. On the way to hospital, Dad said, 'You're just like your mother, Alice. Can you not stop and think for five minutes about what might happen?'

6. After she died, Dad packed everything that had anything to do with her, including the turquoise and gold cushions Tilly and Cee loved so much, into big black bin bags and drove off with them in his car. He didn't bring them back.

7. In summer she got freckles on her cheeks and shoulders, the same way I do (my father told me this, and then blushed, which I'd never seen him do before. I didn't know what to say).

8. She and Dad argued a lot (according to Cee; Tilly says she can't remember, but she's always been one to sit on the fence).

9. She was driving a Citroën GSA. She'd had her licence for five months and twenty-one days. The verdict was accidental death, which sounds too much like incidental for my liking.

10. If it wasn't for me she wouldn't have been driving at all.

The cancer is in my father's pancreas. Cee told me over the phone – me standing in the hostel reception in Ulan Bator, her in Dad's hallway, the line full of static. I'm still not even sure what a pancreas is, though I'd never admit that to Cee.

Cee thinks I'm a lost cause. You're wasting your talents, she tells me, flying off to the other side of the world at the drop of a hat. Time will catch up with you, she tells me – by which she means I should get on and have kids before my ovaries dry up. You did the right thing with Kal, but you need to start thinking about settling down, she says. Dust settles, sediment settles – but I don't say that. What was wrong with Kal anyway, I ask. She just sighs, the way she always does, the way that makes me feel five again.

I stub out my cigarette and ring the doorbell. It's Tilly who answers, and I'm thankful for it. She's wearing tapered jeans, and a voluminous orange T-shirt. Her face is tired and pale. The hall stretches in black and white chessboard squares behind her, and I remember the two of us chalking hopscotch marks, laughing at the chill of the tiles on the soles of our feet.

'Alice.' Tilly opens her arms. She is marshmallow soft. I lean my forehead, for a moment, against her chest, and smell the soft, summery smell of her perfume. Cee is coming down the stairs. Neat white slip-ons, black linen trousers, and a sleeveless turquoise shirt. Her hair looks recently cropped – dyed a chemical shade of red. She has our father's eyes, a deep brown the colour of garden compost. I'm told I have my mother's.

I won't cry. I step away from Tilly. Cee stands with an empty water glass in one hand, her skin puffed red beneath her make-up.

'You should have called,' Tilly says. 'I'd have picked you up. I've got the car here, and it's miserable sitting in a taxi getting your ear chewed off.'

'It's fine,' I say. We stand, awkward, silent. I glance towards the stairs.

'He's sleeping,' Cee says, and I feel a familiar flare of anger. We are all too close

together. It's not a narrow hallway, but I am finding it difficult to breathe.

'How was your flight?' Tilly asks. 'I looked it up – four thousand, three hundred miles. Isn't that amazing?'

The thing I loved more than anything about Mongolia was the horizon – wider than I've ever seen; endless land and endless sky. I push the front door closed. I'd forgotten how it sticks.

'You've got to—' Cee starts.

'I know.' I pull it towards me, shove the handle upwards and slam it shut.

Cee looks at my bag – a small black day-pack – and then looks behind me. 'Is that all you have?'

I picture the baggage hall – fluorescent lights, rows of trolleys, the scratched black rubber of the conveyor belt. I had stood and waited for my rucksack to appear. People snatched up their bags and scurried away. I waited until there were only four things left, circling: two hard cases, a long package wrapped in newspaper and packing tape, and a pink holdall with fraying straps. I waited until the screen flashed up a different flight number and city and a new group of people clustered round. A new consignment of bags began to appear. I thought about just picking one and walking away with it, but didn't.

'I'll go up,' I say, and walk past them, keeping close to the wall so our bodies won't meet.

'Alice, he's asleep.' Cee puts her hand on my arm.

'I'll stick the kettle on – we can have a cup of tea.' Tilly's fingers fuss at the hem of her T-shirt.

I step out of Cee's grasp. 'I won't wake him.'

I am four steps up now. The stairs are painted white, the red carpet running along

the middle pinned down by thin brass rods. Kal joked about it, the first time he came here – an interminable Sunday lunch. I feel important every time I go up to the bathroom, he said, and I laughed, because I'd never thought about it like that before. I wish he was standing next to me, holding my arm. I still have his number in my phone. Sometimes I just sit and look at it.

'Alice.' It's Tilly's voice. Her face is scrunched into a frown. 'Just—' She squeezes her hands together. 'Just be prepared, honey.'

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My father's room is at the front of the house, on the first floor. It has two tall windows which look out onto the street, over the top of the red brick wall opposite and into the courtyard behind. I open the door as quietly as I can, and step inside. The thick green curtains have been pulled shut against the day, and the floor lamp by the sofa casts a warm yellow circle onto the carpet. I don't want to look at the bed. I stare instead at the wardrobe: the miniature triangles of paler wood inlaid around its edges, the oval mirror, the dull metal hinges. I look up at the ugly ceiling rose and its pauper's chandelier, six fake candles resting in dusty holders.

Cee once told me that before I was born, in the other house, her and Tilly were allowed into our parents' room on Saturday mornings. They used to sneak in between Dad and Mama and demand to be told stories. After the stories, if he wasn't working, our father would get up, put his dressing gown on over his blue pyjamas and go downstairs. Tilly and Cee would roll about in the warm space he left behind, waiting for his footsteps on the stairs and the clatter of a tray. Saturday morning stories and breakfast stopped once they moved here and I came along. When I asked why, Cee just pursed her lips and shrugged, as though somehow it was my fault.

The room smells of skin and sweat. It's too hot. I rest my hands on the sofa back, and I listen: a gentle tick from the water pipes; a bird chirruping to its mate outside; the sound of my father, breathing.

The last time I saw him was a couple of days before I flew to Moscow. We had dinner at a new Spanish place in South End Green. Tapas; a rich red wine. There's a recession coming, Alice, he said, I'm not sure it's the best time to abandon your job. It's just temping, I said, and I've got savings. I need to get out of here. You always need to get out of here, he said, why is that? I told him about Kal, but that didn't explain all the other times. I'm trying to think now if he'd looked pale, or thin, if he'd seemed ill, or worried. I don't remember.

The man in the bed does not look like my father.

My father has a strong face, a square jaw, thick bushy eyebrows. He is a big man: tall, not fat, but bulky. His shoulders are broad, his chest solid. When he hugs you – which isn't often, but isn't never – you can feel the strength in his arms. This man is too small to be my father.

On the floor to the right of the bed is a slim white-and-blue box. A thin tube runs from the box, underneath the sheet that covers the man in the bed. A second tube ends in one of those plastic bags you see in hospitals, half full of yellow liquid.

The man in the bed is breathing like an old person. His face is gaunt, the skin tight against the shape of a skull I don't recognise. There's a chair at the left-hand side of the bed. Someone must have brought it up from the dining room. It looks wrong in here, with its high slatted back and narrow cushioned seat. The dining room, too, must look out of sync, one man down.

As I lower myself onto the chair it creaks loudly. I hold myself still. He doesn't wake up. I want to touch his hand, but it's underneath the sheet, and so I sit and look at my own fingers – stacks of silver rings, nails bitten to the quick.

'I just got in,' I say. My voice sounds thin, off balance. 'From Mongolia. I just got in

now.' I feel a sudden sweep of fatigue. 'I'm not even sure what day it is.' I laugh, but it sounds wrong, and so I stop. 'I came as quick as I could, I didn't have mobile reception for a week – more than that.' His hair is roughed up against his pillow; his lips are dry and cracked. I can feel the breath high and shallow in my chest. I want to cry. I want to lie down on the floor and close my eyes. I want to run away.

'I came as soon as I got the messages.'

I remember sitting in the back of a jeep in Mongolia, with a couple from Sweden and a guy from Palestine, my mobile phone useless and forgotten at the bottom of my rucksack, the road – it was hardly a road – jolting us back and forth, and all around us: nothing. Just miles and miles of nothing. The joy of it.

'It's so gloomy in here, Dad. Don't you think it's gloomy?' I stand up and pull the curtains apart. It has started to rain, thin lines of water on the other side of the glass. 'I see England's having another great summer, then,' I say.

'Alice?'

I spin around. 'Dad?' I stay where I am, one hand on the edge of the curtain. I wish I hadn't opened them. The light picks out the shape of his face, casts deep shadows where the skin caves in. His skin is the wrong colour – too much yellow. 'Dad. How are—'

'Terrible.' He sounds like he's got a cold – phlegmy and hoarse.

'My phone didn't have reception,' I say. He coughs and I see his face tense with pain.

'What can I do? What can I get you?'

He moves his head to the left.

'This?' I walk to the bedside table and pick up a wooden stick with a pink cube on the end.

'Dip it – in the glass,' he says.

The glass holds a shallow layer of pink liquid. I dip in the cube and hand it to my father. He dabs the sponge to his mouth. I can see every bone underneath his skin. Maybe we did learn about the pancreas at school. I have a feeling it's a dark, purply red, that it tapers to a point at one end. I can't remember what it does.

'I'm sorry – to ruin – your holiday,' he says. He takes shallow, rattling breaths every few words. The pink sponge falls onto the sheet and spreads a wet stain across the cotton. I pick it up and put it back onto the bedside table.

'It wasn't a—' I stop myself, sit back on the dining chair and wrap one leg over the other. I don't know what to do with my hands, so I shove them underneath my thighs. The edges of my rings dig into the backs of my legs. 'Do you know, in Mongolia, no one owns the land? There are no fences,' I say.

'Did that man – go with you?'

'Kal?'

'The Indian – chap.'

'He's British. I told you, Dad, we split up. I told you that.' I stand and walk to the window, lean my head against the glass. It's cold on my skin. I imagine sitting with Kal outside a yurt, watching the sun turn the earth a rich orange-pink. 'There were eagles too,' I say. 'Massive eagles just by the side of the road – when there was a road. They had these huge claws. They could kill a mouse just by picking it up.'

I hear him shift, and I turn back. He's staring at me. The whites of his eyes are dull yellow.

'You know – that I love – you,' he says. 'As much – as the others.'

I close my fist around a handful of curtain and squeeze hard. It's like there's a weight in my stomach, bigger than my stomach even. I listen to his breath rasp in his throat. The water pipe has stopped ticking.

‘It’s important. I always – told – your mother – it was important.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘For you – to know, for – you to know – that.’

He used to buy me a peppermint mouse from Thorntons every Friday afternoon. I don’t know why I remember it now, but I do: the crackle of plastic wrapping, the glee of biting off the nose – dark chocolate and sweet green mint beneath.

Neither of us speak. His eyelids flicker, then close, and his breath pulls in a faint snore. I walk towards the bed and look down at him.

‘Please don’t,’ I whisper. ‘Please don’t.’

There’s a knock on the door. I expect it to be Tilly or Cee, but it’s a nurse, a short wide woman wearing blue trousers and a loose blue shirt.

‘You’re Alice,’ she says. ‘Mr Tanner’s been telling me all about you.’

‘He has?’

She bustles past me. ‘Sleeping again,’ she says. ‘Let’s be getting this changed, shall we?’ I back away from the bed. She picks up the plastic bag and lifts the sheet. ‘You’ve got the curtains open today, Mr Tanner? That’s nice, isn’t it, a bit of light on the proceedings. And your daughter’s here, that is special.’

‘What did he say?’ I ask.

‘He’s sleeping now.’ She doesn’t even lower her voice. I can see my father’s body – thin beneath cotton pyjamas.

‘I mean about me.’

She turns a valve on the bag and starts to pull it away from the tube. I watch the yellow liquid slosh against the sides.

‘I’ve got to—’ I wave my arm in the direction of the door.

She doesn’t even look up. ‘Right you are, dear. It’s good you’re here, he’s been looking forward to it no end.’

I close the door behind me. The corridor smells the same as it always has – wood polish and a hint of wet plaster. I head up the stairs, aiming for the attic, but Tilly intercepts me.

‘You met Margaret?’ she says.

‘The nurse?’

‘She’s good.’

‘Right.’

‘Cee’s made some tea.’

Kal used to call Tilly and Cee ‘the Terms and Conditions’. How are the Terms and Conditions, he’d say when I got back from any kind of family gathering. Anxious and unreasonable, I’d say, and we’d laugh, every time.

‘I’d quite like to—’ I look towards the attic stairs.

‘Oh, Alice.’ She hugs me, my arms pinned tight to my sides.

‘He understands, doesn’t he? About my mobile. About not having reception. Tilly? He doesn’t think—’ I step away from her and stare at the woodchip wall in front of me. It looks dirty and old. ‘I just don’t want him to think—’

‘I made biscuits,’ she says. ‘The oat ones.’ They’re Dad’s favourite. I imagine him lying in bed, listening to Tilly in the kitchen, the smell of baking drifting up the stairs and into his room.

‘Lead the way, Captain.’ I touch my fingers to my forehead in a mock salute. Tilly gives me a weak smile, then turns and walks in front of me down the stairs.

About the Writer

Sarah Butler is in her early thirties and lives in Manchester. She runs a consultancy which develops literature and arts projects that explore and question our relationship to place (www.urbanwords.org.uk). She has been writer in residence on the Central Line, the Greenwich Peninsula, and at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and has taught creative writing for the British Council in Kuala Lumpur. *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love* is her first novel, and will be published in fourteen languages around the world.