

TLC Showcase

Amna Boheim



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Introduction to *The Silent Children*

Vienna is one of my favourite cities. I could return again and again. I don't know what it is – whether it's the grandeur, the history, the art, but something about the place has found its way into my heart. And so I wanted to write something as a sort of homage to the city I love.

And then there is my love of ghost stories. I've struggled, however, to find one as good as *The Woman in Black* or *The Turn of the Screw*. So, a bit selfishly, I decided to write a story which I would love to read, which, at the end of the last page, makes you want to go back to the beginning again. It's hard. It's particularly hard as I get scared quite easily. If you were to take me to the cinema to watch a ghost or horror flick, be warned that I scream out loud. My husband says my choice of genre is a bit ironic, but then again, I love the challenge of it.

And it has been a challenge. Over the course of my second pregnancy, I wrote my first draft. I'm not sure motherhood, *round-two*, was a break, but it took me far away from my work. When I felt ready, I did a complete re-write, together with a 'field trip' to Vienna. I thought the novel had improved, but I really didn't know whether it was good enough. So I sent it to TLC to have one of their readers, Ashley Stokes, look through it. His feedback gave me a massive boost – I'd succeeded in creating a compelling story full of atmosphere. However, I needed to up the tension, I needed to linger in places. My main character took too much in his stride. He needed to feel the impact too – particularly for the twist at the end to have the desired effect. I suppose my quick cutting was due to my inability to stomach fear myself. But I went back to those scenes and worked to improve them. I took another break over Christmas and then revisited the novel. I then found I had way too many *doors opening*, too much *door knob twisting*, too many *footsteps*, too much *unease*, which all served to smother any sense of tension. So I edited them some more. I think I'm there, but like anything that's creative, I can't let go. It takes discipline to say to yourself, 'stop' and move onto to the next project.

Extract from *The Silent Children*, by Amna Boheim

As the train rattled through the city's underbelly, the house continued to dominate my thoughts. With every flicker of light in the carriage, the house and its features blinked before me: driveway, windows, entrance, stairway, paintings, ornaments, photographs. The stops skipped by – Kettenbrückengasse, Pilgramgasse, Margaretengürtel....Schönbrunn, Hietzing, ...Unter St. Veit. And then: Ober St. Veit. From there it was a twenty minute walk to the house, mostly uphill. But I didn't mind. Its distance from the tourist trails lent the streets a calm: fewer people, less traffic, smaller boutiques and cafes; even the whir of the passing trams sounded quieter, lessening any anxiety I felt.

I approached Himmelhofgasse. My mother's house lay at the end of that road. I regarded the incline, the surroundings, the woodland crowning the hilltop. A breeze rippled about me with the air of an idle spirit as I walked on, taking in the pastel-coloured houses and the mix of conifers and deciduous trees lining the street. They stood like soldiers, ready for inspection, running all the way up the road as far as the house. I came to a stop, standing face to face with the wrought iron gate. I placed my hand on the latch, then slid it open with all the apprehension of a son returning home after a long absence, and stepped into the horseshoe driveway.

My mother's ancestral home had a refined other-world feel with its white stone walls, now dressed with the orange-tinted green of a mature honeysuckle which climbed towards the roof. Its windows sparkled with the kiss of the late afternoon sun, as if to say, *welcome back*. I took this as my prompt and walked up the three steps to the door. I drew the house key from my pocket and held it in the palm of my hand, studying its turreted teeth as if for the first time. Placing the metal in the lock, I twisted it until it clicked, signalling my invitation to enter.

From the threshold I contemplated the house's interior: its white marble floor with its thread of grey veins, the curve of the staircase leading to the two galleries above; the Venini chandelier that hung from the domed atrium. The light from the doorway fell upon two wooden carvings of a saint and an angel fixed to the wall on either side of a bench. That was another antique; my mother had it reupholstered in crimson velvet that always reminded me of blood. I glanced at the mahogany chest next to it. Lying on top were my mother's reading glasses and a stack of unopened letters.

As I shut the door to the outside world, the stillness struck me; not so much the quiet of outside, but a brooding silence that pressed down upon me. I placed my bag on the bench, then looked around once more. Despite the lingering scent of my mother's jasmine perfume, the permanence of her absence infiltrated the house, its corners, its eaves, floating in and around me, until I felt its chilled embrace. I slumped to the floor, my hands cradling my head. Tears seeped through my fingers; I felt like a young boy again, but this time alone.

I dreamt of a girl's hand running her fingers through my hair. My eyes opened wide. I blinked, then blinked again. I was lying curled up on my side; my left cheek pressed to the floor, my fingers encasing my glasses. As I pulled myself up, an ache made its presence known in my lower back and shoulders. I had a dull headache and my mouth felt like straw. The dim light suggested it was early evening. I looked at my watch: it was shortly after six-thirty. Pushing back my hair, I put on my glasses and walked into the kitchen, half expecting to see my mother's housekeeper, Ludmilla, preparing supper. I drank a glass of water in a few gulps, then refilled it, this time taking sips while I looked out of the window to the garden beyond. The lawn had been mown; the roses, begonias, marigolds and others remained in bloom; and the garden furniture outside on the terrace was positioned to capture the late sun.

I went through into the drawing room and drew back the curtains to let in what was left of the daylight, resurrecting life into the space. Musty air wafted about me. I unlocked and opened the French windows, feeling the cooler air slip inside. I then turned around to survey the room: its cream upholstery, the primrose walls with their treasured collection of art. And, on the back wall, the most precious piece of all, worth far more than the house itself: Egon Schiele's *Mother with Two Children*. It always left me cold. Seeing it again after some time, I felt no different. It depicted a woman with her offspring; one blonde, the other brunette, sitting on her lap, set against a mass of muddy charcoal. While the artist had painted the children with a colourful vigour, his rendering of the mother told a different tale: her pallor, the deadness of her eyes, her gaunt body. And she stared – not at the children – but at some imagined point. What I would do with it, and the other things for that matter, I didn't even begin to consider. At that moment all I wanted was to feel the sun's early evening rays on my skin.

Sitting outside, my headache was soothed by the breeze tickling the leaves, and the evensong of the birds. I turned my head upwards to the sky, watching the clouds skim by. My gaze wandered over the house, then around the garden and back to the house. I closed my eyes, trying to squeeze out the sting of tiredness. When I opened them again, I thought I caught sight of a movement by one of the windows on the second floor. I thought it funny how the ebbing light played the fool and I thought no more of it. Instead, I closed my eyes once more, letting my mind wander, seeking out happier memories of my mother and the house. My heart skipped a beat just as the first moment of sleep opened its arms to catch me. Nice as it was to sit outside, I wanted to rest in a proper bed. I went indoors, fetched my bag and went upstairs, noticing a heaviness pressing down on my body.

It was strange how my mother had kept my old bedroom. Over the years it had morphed into something like a memorial dedicated to my childhood and teenage years. The colours remained unchanged with her choice of light blue paint on the walls and a cream carpet. An ancient hi-fi stood in one corner with CDs stacked on a stand next to it. I laughed at my music taste – from Def Leppard and Guns N’ Roses, to Metallica, Nirvana and Pearl Jam, with a few Madonna and Michael Jackson albums thrown in for good measure. My desk was bare, but for an old Pentax camera that had accompanied me on my year abroad between studies. Above it, were three shelves filled with a collection of crime and spy thrillers; some were dog-eared and most were printed with coffee stains. Like the drawing room, the air smelled stale so I went to the window to open it up, absorbing the view towards the city.

The windowsill was home to my collection of model classic cars, with their bonnets facing the window. I picked up a model of a 550 Spyder. As a child, I’d taken a lot of pride over my collection. Although I grew out of them, I couldn’t let them go, and so they formed a permanent part of my bedroom.

I put it back down, distracted by the glimpse of my bed standing opposite the window. Lying there as a child, I could just see the tops of the trees. There was a period when the view had comforted me and I would insist on sleeping with the curtains open. My mother always kept my bed made, and even with her gone, it had retained its *just made* feel. I cast off my clothes, dropping them by my feet. I pulled back the covers and sank into the bed, falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

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Some hours later I woke up. I lay in darkness, unsure of what had stirred me. Sleep still clung to my body, but I was conscious of my whereabouts. Moonlight spilled through the gap in the curtains painting a translucent strip that seeped across the floor. I was aware of my own breathing, the constant rise and fall of my chest.

It felt as though... It was the feeling that I was not alone in my bedroom. That someone lingered by the side of my bed. I closed my eyes and listened. Silence filled the room, but the sensation remained. Somehow, it felt worse with my eyes shut.

I froze.

Even swallowing proved difficult. Only the thump of my heart filled the stillness of the room, a sound that I wished would dampen down. I didn't know what was worse: to keep my eyes closed, letting my imagination accentuate my fear, or to open them, only to see... My heart drummed louder. My breaths came in short waves. Fear or cowardice: whichever, my only thought was that an intruder had broken in. If I kept still enough, then whoever it was would leave. That was my hope at least. Time dragged; a few seconds felt like minutes which in turn felt like hours. I lay motionless while my mind raced through possible consequences.

A slip of air laced my face. I waited. Then I opened my eyes, careful not to move any other part of my body. I saw – at least I thought I saw – a shadow skim across the pool of moonlight, fleeting, retreating towards the bedroom door. Fear knotted itself around my body, squeezing the breath from me. I waited for the sound of an opening door. It didn't come. I waited some more. Nothing. Locked in my bed, I exhaled then gulped in air, trying to slow the beat of my heart. I searched the darkness, but without my glasses, I couldn't see anything other than the straight-lined silhouettes of the furniture. As I lay there, the sounds of the house and outside seemed more accentuated: the gentle wind rubbing against the walls, disturbing the leaves on the trees; the creak and stretch of the house; the faint hum of electricity trickling through the wires. There was nothing to suggest that someone else was in the house. I tried to tell myself that it was no more than my imagination, a mantra that I forced myself to repeat until my limbs loosened up. I swallowed, then reached for my glasses on the bedside table. Putting them on, I relaxed a bit more.

Whatever I felt had gone.

Tension seeped out of my shoulders as I fumbled for the switch of the lamp next to me. The bulb flickered then petered out. I felt for the wire at the base, traced my fingers down its length and nudged the pins into the socket. The light came on as it should, showcasing the familiarity of my old bedroom and belongings. But the experience left me unwilling to go back to sleep. I went to my bag in search of some reading for work. I needed something to distract my mind. Picking out a preliminary research report on a company we were taking public, I returned to bed.

At first I found it difficult to concentrate, but as the nocturnal normality of the house continued, I accepted I must have either dreamt or imagined a presence in my room. I immersed myself in the material. Before I realised it, almost two hours had skipped by. It wasn't quite sunrise, but already I could hear the soft prelude to the dawn chorus. I'd had enough of reading. My headache had returned, my throat felt dry and the growl of my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten for some time.

I wandered downstairs. As I turned the corner I noticed a stream of light coming from the kitchen. I entered the room. A casual drip from the tap drew my attention to the sink. I glanced to the right of it; on the counter stood a glass, already filled with water. My thirst took over and I gulped it down. I refilled it and drank some more, leaning against the kitchen worktop.

A few minutes passed. I yawned; fatigue tugged at my eyelids. I padded over to the sink to rinse out my glass. Above the rush of the water's flow, I thought I heard something else. I lessened the stream and concentrated on the noise, but still I couldn't be sure of what it was. I turned off the tap, dried my hands and the glass, returning it to one of the cupboards. The dull click of the cupboard door echoed in the kitchen. I stood quite still with my back to the doorway. There it was again: a soft but incessant knocking. It didn't come from outside. Nor did it come from the kitchen. I glanced over my shoulder, then turned around to face the empty gloom of the hallway beyond. A cold breeze, wrapped itself around my bare legs and arms. I shivered. Moving to the doorway, my ears tuned into the sound again. I peered out. The sound had grown louder, conspicuous against the silence. Wood against wood: musical, a lullaby, it seemed to come from the direction of the drawing room.

Leaving behind the kitchen, I walked through the hallway and paused under the atrium. I listened once more:

Knock-knock, knock-knock.

Its rhythm grew more urgent, hammering out a Morse code through the house which I couldn't ignore. I followed the noise. My feet were quiet against the marble floor as I approached the closed door of the drawing room. I turned the handle, pushed it open, and stepped inside.

My eyes fell upon the French windows. They were wide open, banging against their frame – quite quickly at first, then more slowly, back to their original andante tempo. I went to shut them, fighting with the curtains which fluttered up like petticoats dancing to the acoustic tune. The sky was edged with the faint pink of dawn, but the looming clouds made it feel further away, rendering it difficult to see anything through my ashen-faced reflection in the glass. I strained my eyes, but there was no sign of an intruder. I stood back, frowning at my own image staring back at me. I rubbed my eyes; my reflection mirrored my action. So did the stranger standing behind me. I let out a shout, jumping away from the window, my arms flailing to regain my balance. I shot a glance over my shoulder, scanning the room. Panic twisted my insides as my heart thumped against my chest. There was no one in the room but me and the figures gracing the Schiele on the back wall.

About the Writer

Almost three years ago, I left the City for a bit of motherhood and apple pie. Anyone with children will tell you that they do permanent damage to grey cells; mine, with child one, got well and truly killed off. What possessed me, then, to take on the mantle of writing a novel, I have no idea – but what I do know, is that it’s hard without a functioning brain. For help, I joined Faber Academy’s July 2012 *Fiction: The Basics* three-day introductory course. *The Silent Children* is my first novel, an idea I developed during a further six-month fiction course.

