

Withering Tights
By Louise Rennison

Chapter 1
On the showbiz express

Wow. This is it. This is me growing up. On my own, going to Performing Arts College. This is good-bye, Tallulah, you long, gangly thing, and helloooooo, Lullah, star of stage and . . . owwwwooo. Ow and ow.

The train lurched and I've nearly knocked myself out on the side of the door. I'm bound to get a massive lump. Oh good, I can start college with two heads. . . .

I've been reading my brochure about the summer school. It has a picture of a big manor house and underneath it says:

Welcome to Dother Hall. This magnificent center of the performing and visual arts nestles among the beautiful Yorkshire Dales.

The staff and friendly local people offer a warm hand of encouragement to all of our prospective students. Think Wuthering Heights but with more acting and dancing and less freezing to death on the moors!!

Well, it was either this or going on an Outward Bound course with my little brother, Connor. The last time I went camping with him he cooked a dead butterfly and made it into a sandwich for me. For a laugh. He put tomato sauce on it.

I've been looking over the top of my brochure at the bloke opposite. He is the grumpiest man in the universe probably.

He's got no hair on his head, but he has loads of red hair shooting out of his ears. Like there are a couple of red squirrels nesting in there. Which would be quite good actually, as they are an endangered species.

His wife said to him, "Oooh look, Fred, the sun's coming out."

And he said, "It can please its bloody self."

Is this what Yorkshire folk are like?

I wonder if anyone is missing me at home?

It will be next week before my grandma notices that my egg-cup hasn't been used. When I tried to explain to her that I was going to performing arts college in Yorkshire for the summer, and she said, "Will you bring a trifle back?"

Maybe she thought I said I was going to Marks and Spencers for the summer.

Mum didn't comment because as usual she wasn't there. She's gone to Norway to paint.

Not people's houses. She's doing her art.

When I stayed over with Cousin Georgia last night, I asked her what sort of painting the Norwegians did and she said, "It's mostly sledges."

I thought she meant they painted sledges a lot, but she said, "No, my not-so-little cousy, they paint WITH sledges."

She said the official term for that kind of work was "Sled-werk," and that it was one of the reasons why Norwegians had such big arms and had therefore become Vikings (for the rowing). And that if I dropped "Sled-werk" into a conversation at art college, people would be impressed and not notice my knees . . .

Georgia knows a lot of stuff. Not just about painting, but about life. And boys. She wears a bra. It's a big one. She showed me her special disco inferno dancing and her lady bumps were jiggling quite a lot.

I wish I wore a bra. And jiggled.

It's so boring being fourteen and a half.

She's nice to me, but I know she thinks I'm just a kid.

When I left she gave me her "special" comedy mustache. She's grown out of it and thought it would suit me. She said, "Always remember, Lullah, if in doubt, get your mustache out."

I do love Georgia and wish I lived near her. I haven't got a sister and it's not the same having a brother. Connor mostly likes to talk about what he's going to kick next.

And that I am like a daddy longlegs in a skirt.

And how he could win a kicking contest with a daddy longlegs.

Is that normal in a boy?

Well, all will be revealed when I start my new life at Dother Hall.

Georgia's also given me a secret note to read on my first day at college. She says she will write to me. But will she?

I feel a bit miz.

Usually in the holidays I stay with Grandma. It was she who filled in the Dother Hall form for me. In the section about "talents and special interests" she put "Irish dancing and ball games."

You would have thought that would be a definite "no" from them, but they accepted me. Perhaps they thought I was some kind of dancing juggler.

Anyway, it's only for five weeks and then there is an assessment and you get chosen to stay on or not in the proper school.

I will look at the college brochure again to get me in the creative zone.

Let me see.

Here is a photo of a girl leaping around in the dance studio. The caption says:

Eliza loses herself in the beauty of modern dance.

As far as dancewear is concerned Eliza has gone for big tights.

As indeed she needs to.

Oh, and here's a photo of a boy.

What on earth is he holding?

Let's see.

The caption says:

Martin has made an instrument. Here he is holding his own small lute.

Crumbs.

Martin has got very bright lips.

Perhaps he is a mouth-breather; that makes your lips go very red.

Or perhaps it is lipstick.

I suppose anything goes in the crazy world of dance and theater! Hey nonny no, this is my new world, the world of showbiz!

But what if the course is full of people who can sing and dance and everything, and are really confident?

And hate me because of my nobbly kneecaps?

Uh-oh, we are arriving at my station. I must get my bag down. I'll get up on the seat and try and reach it. . . . Oh great balls of fire, I've just accidentally kicked Mr. Squirrel as he was getting up.

What does, "You great big dunderwhelp, use your bloody goggles!" mean in English?

I bet it's not nice.

His wife said, "Take no notice, love. If there was a moaning medal, he'd win it hands down."

I let them get off first.

How come everyone else in my family is the right height and I have knees that are four feet above the ground?

I swung the train door open and saw the sign:

Skipley

Home of the

West Riding Otter

There was a little bus to take us into Heckmondwhite. I didn't know sheep could go on buses, but they can. One was sitting next to me. Not on its own, I mean. It hadn't just got on with its bus pass. There was a woman in Wellingtons holding it.

She said to me, "I'd sit upwind if I were thee, love."

We bundled along on the bus on a road that went up and down dales. Along the skyline I could see the moorland dotted with craggy outcrops.

The sheep woman said, "That's Grimbottom Peak; when a fog comes down you can't see your chin in front of you. Perilous."

Heckmondwhite was just like a proper village. It had a village green, and a pub, and a post office, a church and a hall and everything.

I found the Dobbinses' house just off the green round the corner from the village shop, like the directions said. I'm not allowed to stay at Dother Hall because I was the last one to apply for the course and there was no room in the dormitory.

And do you know why? It's because I haven't got normal parents. If I had ordinary parents like everyone else they would have booked early. But oh no, I had to wait until Dad could get to the post office in Kathmandu so that we could phone him and he could pay for the course. Why is he there anyway? He's probably found the only bearded ant on the planet. Or the last of the Ice Age big-bottomed goats. He loves that sort of thing. He is like a cross between David Bellamy and an excitable Great Dane.

Well, at least the Dobbinses will be normal people, married and so on. They might turn out to be really cool. I expect they will be. They must be quite laid-back and avant-garde to take us “artists” in.

I opened the little gate and walked up the path to knock on the front door. I wonder if I will be in my own sort of extension bit? I expect so. Maybe with that “loft living” sort of furniture. All minimal and shiny surfaces and a Jacuzzi bath. I hope they’ve got satellite TV because . . .

The door opened. And a woman in a Brown Owl uniform said, “Tallulah! Yoo-hoo!! Aren’t you nice and tall!! Come in, come in. Mind your head on the low— Oh dear. Never mind. Harold is out running the Christian Youth Table Tennis Club, but the twins will be back from Play-Doh Hour in a minute.”

Mrs. Dobbins, or ‘Call me Dibdobs, everyone does,’ gave me a long hug. She’s very pink and enthusiastic. And covered in badges. One of them said, *Knots. Advanced.*

She took my bag in her sturdy arms and showed me up to my room at the top of the house.

My room is mostly wood, with wood extras. It is quite literally loft living in the sense that it IS a loft.

Dibdobs said, “I’m going to make us a traditional tea to welcome you. So make yourself at home. You can see for miles from your window.”

She beamed at me through her roundy glasses. She said, “Oooh, isn’t this exciting??”

And gave me another big hug.

I wonder if she has got a “hugging” badge? Probably.

As she went off down the steep wooden steps singing, “Bring me sunshine in your smile, bring me laughter all the while . . . lalalalala,” I looked around my new bijoux home.

It’s a sweet room really, you know, good, but I thought going to performing arts college might be more . . . gooderer.

I went to the window.

Yep, you could see for miles.

And do you know what you could see for miles? Sheep.

Oh no, there are some pigs.

I put my bag down on the bed. My bed, by the way, is wooden. It’s got wood carvings all over it. Even the bedhead has got furry things carved into it. Squirrels, I think. Or maybe hairy, long-tailed slugs.

I put my secret letter from Georgia under my pillow. For luck.

I unpacked my suitcase and hung my clothes up in the (wooden) wardrobe. I must start planning what to wear for my first day at Dother Hall. It will be weird not having to wear a really crap uniform. I wonder if we are allowed makeup? At my school, if we had worn makeup we would have had our heads cut off. And put on the school gates as a warning to others.

But hahahahaha, I am on my own now.

I am flying solo.

I can cover myself in lipstick from head to foot if I feel like it.

Not that I will, actually, as I have only got one lipstick.

I need to get a lot more.

I wonder where Boots is in the village?

Dibdobs called me down for tea. I had changed into my jeans and a rib top and my Barely Pink lipstick. Live as you mean to go on, I say. In fact, I might go the whole hog and get some blusher.

Dibdobs had a frilly apron over her Brown Owl uniform when I went down into the kitchen. She was just dishing up sausages and she gave me a super-duper smile. I had no idea that teeth could be so . . . teathy.

She said, "They're local."

Does it matter that the sausages are local? I'm just going to eat them, not make friends and go to the cinema with them.

But she's only trying to be nice; this is how most people live. I think. But how would I know?

I smiled at her as I sat down in front of my sausages. And said, "Oh, goodie."

I've never said "Oh, goodie" in my life.

It feels good.

I may say it a lot and make it something I am notorious for.

Because when I am famous I will have to have a quirky personality.

I can't just rely on having sticky-out knees.

The door slammed open and a voice shouted, "I've brought 'em back, I've got most of the worst off, but they'll need a good soak. Bye."

Dibdobs shouted, "Thanks, Nora."

The door slammed again and two toddlers shuffled into the kitchen.

Both with bowl haircuts.

Bowl hair with Play-Doh in it.

Dibdobs was busy at the stove and said over her shoulder, "Hello, boys, this is Tallulah."

They came and looked at me for a bit whilst I was chewing.

One said, "Goo-morning, did you hear me clenin my teef?"

Um, it wasn't morning. And he didn't have any teeth except for one waggly one right at the front. And he didn't look like he would have that for long.

Mrs. Dobby was beside herself with joy.

"Tallulah, this is Max and Sam. Say hello, boys."

One started picking his nose and the other one, Max (or Sam), said, "They've gotten out, I've been feelin' for 'em but I can't find 'em."

Mrs. Dobby was getting a bit red in the face and her roundy glasses were steaming up, but she didn't raise her voice, she just said, "What is it you were feeling for to find, darling?"

Max, who had just been staring at me and waggling his loose tooth, piped up.

"Snails. Great big sjuuuge ones with sjuuuge shells."

I put my sausage to the side of my plate.

"We put them to seep."

Put them to seep?

Seep where?

They'd better not be seeping anywhere near me.

The boys stared at me all through my jelly and ice cream. And then, as a bit of light relief, Harold, Mr. Dobby, came home from his Christian table tennis.

He said, "Hello hello hello! Welcome welcome welcome. I'll just pop my table tennis bat in the bat drawer and I'll be with you."

He's jolly and beamy like Dibdobs and he's obviously where the twins get their looks from.

He also had a bowl haircut.

Perhaps Dibdobs has got a badge in "bowl cuts." I bet she has.

Despite his haircut, Harold is so happy. When he heard that the sausages were local he almost had to go and have a lie down, he was so thrilled. I like the Dobbinses already, but I don't know what to do with them. I'm not the dibdodbib jolly sort of person, I'm more the dark nobbly sort of person. But I did smile and nod a lot. Maybe they think that I am a bit shy?

That's good.

Shy is good.

I am going to be quite shy.

I will become known for my shyness.

And my quirky use of language, like saying "oh, goodie" or "yum yum." Or "Yaroo!" Although I don't want to overdo it and make people think I'm a bit simple.

So, here I am in a squirrel room near a place called Grimbottom.

I put all my books on the shelves. *Wuthering Heights* is the set book for the course.

In my study notes it says:

How any human being could have attempted to write Wuthering Heights without committing suicide before finishing two chapters is a mystery. It is a mixture of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors.

I was beginning to feel really sorry for myself and lonely when Dibdobs knocked on my door. She has brought me a mug of hot milk and, yaroo!, some slippers shaped like squirrels to make me "feel at home."

So she clearly thinks I live in a hole in a tree.

She said to me, "I hope you like them, Harold made them at his sewing class."

I said, "Oh yes, they're, well, they're very unusual . . . and spiffing."

Spiffing? Where did that come from? I am even surprising myself with my quirky use of language.

I didn't have anything else to do, so after she had gone I tried my slippers on. You put your big toe into the snout and the ears stick out attractively at the sides. The tails nestle up the backs of your legs. Perhaps I should wear them to college for my first day, as a quirky fashion statement.

The zany, free world of a performer.

Hmmmm. I could wear my false mustache AND the squirrel slippers on Monday. I could. If I wanted to make the girls laugh and the boys ignore me. The one thing I know about boys so far is that they don't like "fun" dressing in girls. I tried a cowboy hat on in Topshop and Connor practically wet himself.

I wonder what sort of boys will be at the college? Yeeha! A whole summer of boys. Painting, sculpting, dancing, leaping—leaping like gazelles pretending to be chasing birds. And of course, boys.

I am feeling nervous about Monday now. What if I am so rubbish at everything that I am asked to leave?

I was lying on my bed waggling my slippers around, preparing to tuck them up in bed with me, when I heard laughter from somewhere outside, nearly below my window, and a sort of shuffling and rustling.

A girl's voice grumpily said, "Oy, Cain, stop it. Are we officially going out or what?"

Then a boy's voice, quite deep and with a really strong accent, said, "There's no need to be such a mardy bum. I'm off, see you around."

The girl said, "When?"

And the boy's voice said, "I don't know, tha's getting on me nerves, I dint realize tha' were such a quakebottom. Why don't tha just hang around with the usual garyboys?"

A quakebottom?

Someone had got a trembling bottom?

I must see this.

I got off the bed and crawled to look through the window. It was very dark out there and I couldn't see much.

I heard the girl say, "Oy, Cain, wait for me!"

Then there was a sudden loud fluttering of wings and flash of white and a horrible screech like something had been killed. And illuminated in the moonlight, I saw an eerie snowy barn owl fly up into a tree near my window. It settled on the branch facing me and I could see a mouse. Dangling out of its beak.

The owl looked at me and blinked really slowly. Then it shut its eyes completely. The mouse started disappearing, bit by bit. The owl was swallowing the mouse whole. Head first. And having a little snooze at the same time.

Crikey.

My notes are bloody right. This is a place of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors. And that's just Cain.

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