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Opening extract from

A Midsummer Tights Dream

Written by

Louise Rennison

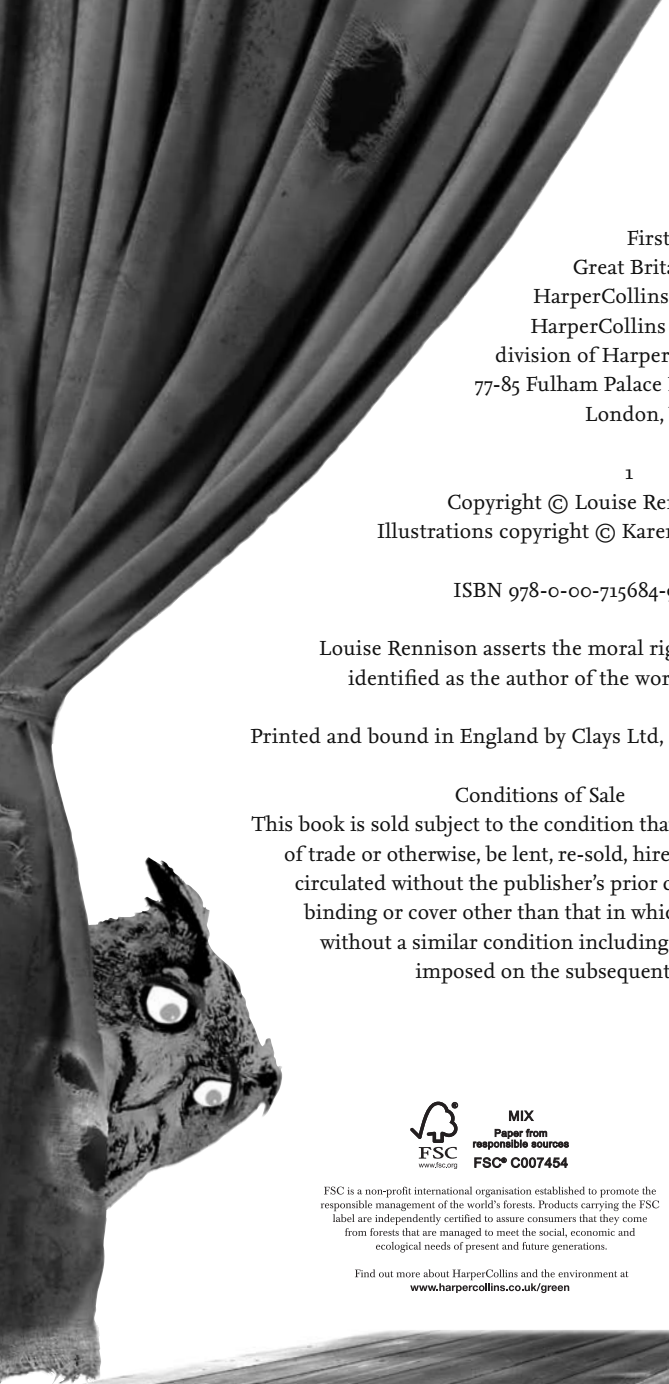
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Chapter 1

Back on the showbiz express

Performing Arts College, here I come again! Hold on to your tights!! Because I am holding on to mine, I can tell you. Which makes it difficult to go to the loo, but that is the price of fame!!! And fame is my game!

Once more I am chugging back to Dother Hall. Or 'the theatre of dreams' as Sidone Beaver, the principal, calls it. I am truly on the showbiz express of life.

Well, the stopping train to Skipley. The Entertainment Capital of the North. Or home of the West Riding Otter, as some not showbiz people call it. I don't think they mean that only a big fat otter lives in the town, although you never know!

Hooray and chug-a-lug-a-doo-dah!!!!

I feel like shouting out to the heavens. I think I will. I can now because the grumpy woman with the stick got off at the last stop. Oh the Northern folk with their jolly Northern ways. She was so grumpy about her gammy leg. She said the stick had worn down on one side so that she fell over in strong winds. I didn't ask her any of this, she just told me. But hey-nonny-no, as Shakespeare said. I am going to pull down the window and shout out loud:

"The name is, Tallulah. Tallulah Casey!!!! And I'm back. I'm moving up! Moving on up! Nothing can stop me! Yes, I used to be shy and gangly with nobbly knees and no sticky-out bits. No corkers. I

was corkerless. I didn't even wear a corker holder. But now even my corkers are on the move!!!"

Especially when the train keeps stopping unexpectedly. What now? Maybe the West Riding Otter is on the line. The tannoy is crackling but I can only hear heavy breathing and snuffling. Lawks a mercy, the wild otter has hijacked the train!

He wants to make people understand that otters have feelings too, they're not just furry fools—

Ooomph.

Oooooh blimey, I nearly shot into the opposite seat then because we're lurching off again.

Woo-hoo!

Anyway, I'm being giddy about the otter. He can't really be driving the train because he couldn't reach the driving wheel. Unless he's got stilts. And it doesn't say Skipley is the home of the West Riding Circus Otter. With his big shoes.

I don't care about the otter driver! Live and let live I say.

Uh-oh, the tannoy is crackling again.

"Sorry about that, ladies and gentlemen, I momentarily lost hold of my pie. Next stop Skipley."

We're just passing Grimbottom Peak. Brr. It looks so dark and forbidding up there. I'm surprised it's not pouring down with rain and… it is pouring down with rain.

Crumbs, it's like the lights have been turned off. You can hardly see Grimbottom. The locals say that when daytrippers are up there the fog can come down in minutes. Mr Bottomley at the post office once told me and Flossie:

"One minute t'daytrippers are up there on't top, playing piggy in't middle like barm pots. The next it's so dark they can't even see t'ball. And it's in their hand. Hours later the grown ups stumble home but the little'uns are nivver seen no more. Sometimes late at night tha can hear 'em up there wailing, 'Mummeee… Dadeeeee…' All them lost bairns, speaking from beyond the grave."

Flossie said, "That's rubbish. There's a massive wild dog up there called Fang. Half dog, half donkey, and it comes out in the fog and takes the children and raises them as its puppies."

In my opinion, even though I haven't known her for long, my new friend Flossie is what is commonly known as 'mad'.

But mad or not, I am really really excited about seeing her and my new mates again. Vaisey and Flossie and little Jo and Honey, who can't say her 'r's, but knows everything about boys. She says she always has "two or thwee on the go".

We can go into the woods near Dother Hall again, to our special place! And gather round our special tree. Our special tree where we met the boys from Woolfe Academy when they surprised us doing our special dance that Honey taught us. She said we had to be proud of all of ourselves, even the bits we didn't like. It was a "showing our inner glory" dance. Or "inner glorwee" as Honey called it. Which in my case was hurling my legs around shouting, "I love my knees, I love them!!!"

Not quite as embarrassing as Vaisey waggling her bottom at the tree, but close.

The Woolfe Academy boys, well Charlie and Phil, call us the "Tree Sisters".

Charlie said to me… Well, I won't think about Charlie. Not after what happened after he kissed me.

Where was I in my performing life? Oh yes, when I got to Dother Hall I couldn't do anything. The others could sing and dance and act but all I could do was be tall and do a bit of Irish dancing.

I was convinced that I would never be asked back and that I would never wear the golden slippers of applause. Things changed when Blaise Fox, the dance tutor, saw my Sugar Plum Bikey performance. My ballet based on The Sugar Plum Fairy only done on a bicycle. The one when my ballet skirt got caught in the back wheel, and I accidentally shot off my bike and destroyed the backstage area. I remember what she said.

She said: "Tallulah Casey, watching you is like

watching someone whose pants are on fire." Then she asked me to play Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* at the end of last term. And the rest is showbiz legend.

Heathcliff's Irish dancing solo was a triumph!!! And also, not so easy in tight trousers.

I still don't know why she cast me as Heathcliff though.

Perhaps I really do look like a boy?

If I look down and squint my eyes a bit I can definitely see pimply bumps in the corker area.

No one can argue with that. The front of a jumper never lies.

My jumper is one of the ones Cousin Georgia and her Ace Gang chose for me. It's green and she says it goes with my eyes and gives me *je ne sais quoi*.

Well, she actually said, "It says 'ummmmmmm' but not 'oooohhhh, look at me, I'm a tart'."

Nearly at Skipley. I'm so excited. This is going to be my Winter of Love, I can tell.

When I stayed with Cousin Georgia on my way back from summer school it was brilliant. I haven't really spent a lot of time with her before because of being in Ireland and having crap parents who actually do stuff. Not just bake tarts or DIY like everyone else's parents. Not good old boring stuff. My mum goes off and paints and my dad goes off exploring to find endangered things. He collects molluscs mostly but I think last time he found a rare hairy potato. He's like a cross between David Bellamy and… a Labrador. That is not a proper dad in anyone's language.

That's a Labradad.

Hee. I think that might very nearly be a joke.

I'm going to put it into my performance art notebook that I will be keeping.

I've got a special new notebook with a black glossy cover and some plums on the front of it.

It's really arty, and er… fruity.

I've already made my first entry.

It says:

Winter of Love.

I'll just add my "Labradad" idea.

Labradad. A portrait of a dad who is half pipe smoking bloke and half Labrador. He's confused between the two worlds. Between pipes and sticks. I'm thinking an improvised dance piece. Perhaps the Labradad fetching sticks. Or pipes?

Or ducks?

Hmmmmm.

I love my parents but they're not normal. Or around much. But they have let me come back to Dother Hall – even though I'm not allowed to board.

It was great staying with Cousin Georgia. It was brilliant on the boy front as well.

She got her Ace Gang round to teach me "wisdomosity" and also "snogging techniques". We all tucked up in her bed, which was cosy.

Georgia said, "Have a jammy dodger and give us the goss snogwise."

All the gang were wearing false beards to help me get into the mood.

So… I told her about going to the cinema in Skipley with some boys from Woolfe Academy. I told her about my first kiss. With floppy Ben. And how it was like having a little bat trapped in my mouth.

Her Ace Gang looked at me. Then Georgia said, "Are you a fool with just a hint of an idiot thrown in?"

Then they gave me their wisdomosity about boys. And snogging.

Gosh, Georgia knows a lot.

About varying pressure of the lips, what to do with your tongue, (don't waggle it about like a fool), the scoring system for snogging, (Number 1 to Number 10, I can't remember all of them but I do remember Number 4 is "a kiss lasting over three minutes without a break". You need a mate for that one, so that they can time it for you.).

Honestly. I couldn't believe it.

I'm dying to try out my new skills.

The amount she knew, she must have spent most of her time doing snogging research.

I said that to her and she said, "I did, my strange gangly coussy. But I have put aside snogging to teach you the ways of boydom. I do it because I luuurve you. But not in a lezzie way."

Which is good.

I think.

What is a "lezzie way"?

I think it's to do with girl snogging.

But I didn't ask.

Oh chuggy-chug-chug. Come on, train!!!

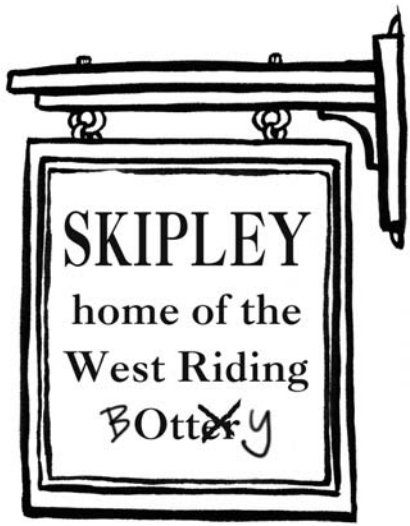
I wonder what time the rest of the Tree Sisters will arrive tomorrow? I can ask Honey about the lezzie thing, she will know.

Oh, here we are at the train station. Hurrah!!! There's its sign swinging in the biting gale force wind. Just as I remember:

Skipley Home of the West Riding Otter.

Hang on a minute, some Northern vandal has

painted a "b" and a "y" over the otter bit. So now it reads:



I have just got off the showbiz express and now I am getting on the bus of hope. Which will transport me to… The Theatre of Dreams.

I can see the bus driver through the closed door, sitting in the driver's seat. I recognise him from last term. I wonder if he recognises me?

As I hauled my bag on board up the steps he put the pipe to one side of his mouth and shouted, "Stop messing about and get on if you're

getting on, merry legs. It's bloody parky with that door open."

I said, "Why did you call me merry legs?"

He said, "Because you're lanky and your legs are all over the shop."

I paid my fare and he said, "Come back to prat around like a fool at Dither Hall again, have you?"

Before I could say, "It's Dother Hall, actual—" he accelerated off so violently that I shot down to the end of the bus and almost ended up in a small child's pushchair. Luckily there wasn't a small child in it, just a pig.

The woman with the pushchair said, "Mind my pig."

I am huddled up well away from her, but I think I can still smell pig poo.

We bumped along the road to Heckmondwhite. The driver is careering along sounding his horn whenever there is anything in his way on the road. Pedestrians. Bicyclists. A cow pat. But he slowed down behind a lollipop lady who was walking home. With her sign. She tried to let him pass

but he cheerily waved her on and drove slowly behind her. Then for no reason when we got to a sharp corner he revved up and blasted his horn and she fell into a hedge. He was laughing so much I thought he might swallow his pipe.

I couldn't help being excited. This is like a postcard of a winter scene in Yorkshire. There is even some snow on the top of Grimbottom Peak. And I shivered as I thought about Fang up there. Raising his fictitious children as fictitious puppies.