

The tulip touch



I saw lots of her at school.

She had no other friends. Nobody else could stand the embarrassment of pretending that they believed her awful lies.??? The armys borrowing one of our fields today. When I get home, theyre going to let me drive a tank??

™ Oh, I really believe that, Tulip! So likely! Theyd walk off, scoffing.

Id stare at the ground, and, guess what, Id feel sorry for her. I knew she was making a fool of me in front of everyone. (Only an idiot would make a show of believing her rubbish.) But instead of just walking away, exasperated, like everyone else, Id try taking her arm and distracting her. `Want to play Road of Bones on the way homeShed shake me off, rude and ungrateful.

Even back then I had to ask myself why I stayed around. It wasnt out of pity, I knew that. Nobody has to carry on telling ridiculous lies, even if its obvious that no one believes them. Ive won a big competition. I found a scratchcard in my cornflakes and I was lucky. So now Ive won this beautiful yellow silk dress??™ Next time we bought sweets in Harrys supermarket, Id linger by the breakfast cereal shelves. Theres nothing about a competition on any of these packets??™ No.

It was a scratchcard inside??™ Strange that no one else has got one??™ They only sent out a few as a special anniversary thing. Thats why the prize is a yellow silk dress. Its the very same one that the model wore in their first advert??™ Thats what Dad came to call ??? The Tulip Touch?????” that tiny detail that almost made you wonder if she might, just for once, be telling the truth. And then this man went grey and keeled over. And as I was phoning for the ambulance, his fingers kept twitching, and his wedding ring made a

tiny little pinging noise against the metal of the drain. So I wasn't at school because the police needed one extra person my age and size, for a line-up. They wouldn't say why they'd arrested the girl, but one of them did tell me that he thought she was Polish??™ Ah! Dad would murmur in unfeigned admiration.

Polish The perfect Tulip Touch! She'd give him a pained wooden stare. SorryNothing: He'd turn away, of course, to hide his grin. But I'd be left to see the look of venom on her face. Tulip loathed being teased. It was as if the moment these stupid stories were out of her mouth, she believed them completely, and anyone who queried even a tiny part of them was going to be her enemy, and hated forever. So it was Dad, not me, who risked a bit of mischief a couple of weeks later.

So where's the great yellow dress, Tulip How come you haven't brought it round to show us yet She looked surprised. Didn't I tell you I had it ready in a bag. Then Mum knocked over a bottle of bleach, and some got on the sleeve. So she's posted it off to a big firm in Chichester that does a lot of mending for the royal family, to see if they can patch it from the hem??™ Dad watched her, spellbound. Once she was gone, he turned to Mum. Poor little imp. What sort of squashing must she get at home, to think she has to make up all this stuff to impress usMum just said irritably: You'd think she had more than enough brains to know better! And you would, too.

She was miles cleverer than me. If it weren't for her missed days, and undone homework, she would have beaten me in every test. But, even in good weeks, Miss Henson had problems with Tulip. Please try and settle down.

You're distracting everybody round you??™ Now that's not what I told you to do, is it Tulip! I warn you.

I've had enough. If she'd spoken to me that sharply, I'd have died of fright. But Tulip didn't care. A moment later, she'd be rushing out of her seat across the room. I can see Julia's rubber on the floor! And a minute or so later: Now I'm going to help Jennifer with her project??™ There was a plaintive and immediate wail. `Stop her, Miss Henson! I don't want her help! Out came the tongue. (Tulips, not Jennifer's.

)Tulip! Back to your table! Sit down! And stop being such a nuisance! I sat so quiet I was hardly there. That's why she left us side by side, I expect. So I could water Tulip's fidgets down.

But somehow we went together well, and things worked out. We were the triangles in primary band. We shared counting the lunch money two months in a row (though, now I look back, I realise that was probably Miss Henson's way of getting the job done properly through Tulip's month of office). And we were the Ugly Sisters in the Christmas play. We belonged together! At first, I could tell, both Miss Henson and Mr Barraclough were deeply dubious about giving Tulip the part she begged for so piteously.

I have to warn you, Tulip. If you miss more than a couple of rehearsals, we'll have to take the part off you. So are you sure? She nodded vigorously. And I must have a note from your father saying he won't mind you coming-in for the evening performances??™ Tulip's keen look turned sour. Nobody else has to bring in any note??™ Miss Henson sighed. I'm sorry, Tulip.

Its just that Mr Barraclough hasnt forgotten yet.??™ When shed walked off, I asked Tulip: Hasnt forgotten whatLast time. Before you came. I was a Dancing Bean??™ Was it difficult(It seemed the best way of asking, What went wrong)?? I did it fine; she said.

I learned the song. I knew the dance. But then something came up. So I couldnt do it.??™ Id been fobbed off with that something came up too often myself.

But in the first flush of being her Ugly Sister, I felt generous. Youd think hed want you to have a good part this time.??™ She executed what I could only take to be a short snatch of Bean Dance. It wouldnt have mattered so much, except for the others??™ OthersThe other beans. The dance was a bit complicated, you see. So they couldnt do it without me??™ Oh??™ I had a sudden vision of everyone trying to get through the big night with only one Ugly Sister. Me. But in the end, there wasnt any trouble.

Her mother sent in the note. Tulip showed up every day that we had a rehearsal. And she and I turned out to be the stars of the show. Tulips witchy foot-stamping frenzies and my vacuous no-one-at-home stare were far more fun to watch than prissy Cinderellas tears. Each time we stumbled off stage, Mr Barraclough was waiting with the grease stick. My first few discreet spots grew, scene by scene, into a riot of measles.

Hed spray more cobwebs onto Tulips frizzy green wig, and push us both on again, hissing, Brilliant, the pair of you! Keep it up! And so we did, three evenings in a row, getting the loudest laughter all the way through, and the longest applause at the end. After the last show I was so forlorn I refused to

let anyone take off my make-up. The giant spots rubbed off on my pillowcase, and Tulip had to hand in her green wig in the morning. But no one could wipe the performance out of us. Will you two stop lolling against one another! If you dont, I shall separate you.

??™ Natalie, dont nudge Tulip when you know the answer yourself.??™ ??? Youre not a dummy. Put up your own hand, please??™ Tulip, shes not a puppet on a string.

Just because you need to go, it doesnt follow that Natalie has to go with you.??™ Halfway through January, Miss Henson finally moved us apart. We wailed and fussed.

It isnt fair! We werent being naughty. We were just being sisters, like in the play. Hard cheese??™ she said brutally. Im afraid that was last year??™ And that, of course, set off the next game. ??? That Was Last Year???. The silliest remark would set it off. Marcie cant find her gloves??™ No. That was last year.

Shes looking for her panties now??™ Have you seen Miss Hensons new carThat was last year. She came on a broomstick this morning??™ They were so stupid and unfunny, we only whispered them. But still they sent us into spasms of amusement that the others would gather round us in the playground. Whats the big jokeNothing??™ Wed stick our knuckles in our mouths and snigger some more. Oh, leave them. Theyre just being silly??™ And so we were. So silly that, before I realised what was happening, the taint of unpopularity had thickened and spread.