

# Tulip Tender



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A short story by Evan Tyler

For Emily

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Jennifer admired her two silky soft, cup-shaped white tulips. The two of them, Jamila and Amain, rested four inches apart, green stems growing up from the bulbs she'd planted in a Japanese porcelain pot. Jennifer found the planter at a garage sale earlier in the season and she mused it might inspire her to grow something special – perhaps her favorite flowers – her beloved tulips.

Jennifer was a lover and aficionado of all tulips and she understood the sentiments and meanings attributed to them. Her two blooming summer companions, Jamila and Amain, held deep significance for her and with every passing day grew dearer to her heart. The pair appeared to be identical to each other, of the rare *Orithyia* species, with a matted darker hue on their soft white clefts. The twosome held only subtle differences to make them individually pronounced on closer observation; a flap of the cleft here, a nuance of a darker shade there, a discoloration on one stem. Both tulips were sourced from different people, and it was amazing that they were so much alike.

The first tulip she called Amain, was gifted to Jennifer from her grandmother who was a true tulip enthusiast. For many years she lived with Jennifer and her family in their home in Peterborough, Ontario and recently relocated to White Rock, British Columbia where she settled into a senior's residence. It was getting harder for the family to attend to the many needs and care that an elderly person requires, and it was a family decision – one that Jennifer found very difficult to accept. Many of her grandmother's friends lived out west, and one of them was a resident in the care home she moved to. Jennifer took solace in that, plus Grandma loved the Sunshine Coast and always wanted to return there one day. She attended Simon Fraser University in Burnaby when it was a fledging college, and she told many stories of her youthful years on the west coast. The rain, the fog, the beaches, the driftwood and the carefree days of a hippie culture, back-to-earth movements and wild spiritualities heralded by chanting Hare Krishnas on every corner, wound into the message of peace and love.

On a sunny spring day as Grandma wistfully surveyed the garden plot that she enjoyed puttering about, she had an idea. She dug down in the earth with her trowel and plucked out a tulip bulb and handed it to Jennifer, and Jennifer realized that she had just the perfect pot to plant it in. Amain symbolized the meaningful connection to her grandmother, and therefore it represented the

unconditional love and affection they shared.

The second tulip, Jamila, was similarly gifted to her from the family garden of her late best friend, Ranelle, who'd tragically passed away two months prior from an overdose of a dangerous drug called fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid commonly used in street drugs. Ranelle was a much beloved, long-time school friend, someone with whom she used to share everything with and considered as close as family. She looked up to Ranelle who was a year older, and while both girls were athletes, they veered off into different sports. Jennifer was the back catcher of the school softball team, and Ranelle was drawn to the fast running speed and action of the soccer team. Two years prior Ranelle experienced a dramatic knee injury during a soccer tournament in Edmonton, Alberta. She required a difficult surgery that necessitated a lengthy period of recovery. In the time of convalescence, she was prescribed the painkiller oxycodone. As the story unfolded for Ranelle, as it does for so many others who are similarly prescribed opiates for pain, Ranelle's knee healed, but the oxycodone use came to no arrest.

Fast forward to a small chapter where Ranelle engaged in secret opiate abuse, dishonesty, denial and ultimately dabbling into harder, more dangerous substances that one picks up in the dark alleys and filthy storefronts that pushers inhabit, and as a desperate measure when the option for a medical prescription is denied. Jennifer and others expressed great concern for her alarming behaviors and sought to intervene, suspecting drug abuse. Through ebbs and flows and a genuine effort to live clean, Ranelle seemed to level out and ditch the drugs. Sharing drugs was never part of their special bond, and Jennifer never saw any value in drugs at all.

It was surreal, a shudder and a shock to her when she found out that her friend had suddenly died of an overdose. Jennifer was filled with confusion, regret, remorse and guilt. It had been a trying and difficult summer filled with recurring thoughts of how she could have prevented this. She asked Ranelle's mother if she could dig up a tulip bulb from the family's perennial tulip garden. The two strikingly similar, slightly different tulips were very important to Jennifer's sense of connection to her grandmother and to Ranelle. Because tulips are one of the first flowers to bloom in the spring, for Jennifer, the tulip she named Jamila symbolized rebirth.

Jennifer's interest in tulips was a subject of gentle, friendly teasing by her family. When asked why she loved tulips so much, Jennifer had a readymade set of answers that were researched, fascinating, creative and sometimes idiosyncratic. Half-humorously her father would bait her in a cozy family gathering. The dialogue would go something like this:

"So tell us all about why you love tulips so much, Princess"?"

Jennifer's mother, father and older sister were seated in their adirondack chairs on the cedar patio, leaning toward her while showing that they were listening with rapt attention. She began:

*"The classification of tulips is complex and controversial, like most important and effective contributors to culture like musicians, activists, researchers, and ideas people.*

Jennifer paused and then continued.

*These are definitely qualities I admire, but only when they're in the name of a better and more expansive world. I mean, the tulip belongs to the lily family along with fourteen other genera. It's a super intense organism!*

Then switching to the subject of tulip art, Jennifer resumed:

*My favorite art is from the Dutch Golden Era, and tulips are often found in these paintings. My favorite painting is a Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> Century watercolor of the Semper Augustus tulip, famous for being one of the most expensive tulips sold during that era. The artist is anonymous, which I also like."*

The family would smile and applaud her thoughtful monologues. Jennifer was an aspiring horticulturalist with an interest in art, so she found pleasure in showing off her knowledge of flora and fauna, and especially tulips. It was her final points that kept the crowd entertained. With a precocious bend, she went on:

*"Tulips are two-spirited, essentially hermaphrodites. They are both male and female. They are formed from two pigments working in tandem: a base color and a second laid color. But also, tulips are both male and female in their characteristics, and whether we admit it or not, all of us are. I mean, mom and dad both made me, right? Am I necessarily more of one of them just because of what sex I am?"*

Jennifer's parents were used to her direct, newly forming ideas around sexual and body politics. Whether they were realized in the same stride that Jennifer wax'd on about tulips, they were seeds of her forming identity. Her parents promoted an open dialogue in the home and were accepting of diverse ideas. They fostered an environment for Jennifer to feel safe in the first instance, and to be whoever she wanted to be. Jennifer was fortunate to have a family that inspired a healthy sense of humour in her, as she would state one more of her final floral facts:

*"Tulips can genetically reinvent themselves to accommodate changes in aesthetic values. Their petals could be feathered or box-like, depending. And if there's nothing I like more than tulips, it's renewal of aesthetics. A sense of fashion, ya know?"*

Her family would break out in giggles and sometimes laughter at the delivery of this punchline. Their clever daughter found a great passion that was a wholesome subject and always colored with her own creative spin. Beyond the education, research, punchlines and general loveliness of Jennifer's tulip romance, their deepest appreciation of all was in the names Jennifer chose for her most recent acquisitions – Jamila and Amain, both derived from Moroccan origins that paid homage to her grandparents who immigrated to Canada in the 20's. Factually, the name "tulip" was derived from the Persian word for turban, which the tulips seem to resemble. For Jennifer's parents, this deference to their heritage was touching by showing her respect of their family history. For Jennifer, however, parental approval as well as historical checkmarks functioned in tandem – much like the dual nature of the tulip. This dual-dimensionality was an idea that began to take root and pleased Jennifer.

Most summers, Jennifer would happily tend to the tulips that were blooming in the garden plot, the first among other budding plants and flowers. It was no secret of course that her greatest appreciation would continually stem from the early spring that permitted her sacred tulip-tending. When they perished as summer's long shadows emerged, she would be swept up in a melancholy emotion in advance of an optimism and promise of another spring that would once again bring what she called Tulip Time. Her summers were generally a time of carefree days filled with sunshine, soft winds and summer showers.

In contrast to these lived summers, Jennifer now felt the weight of the sky on her shoulders with the sudden and tragic passing of her friend and the longing of her grandmother's comforting presence. Jennifer spent most of her time alone sitting near her tulips – Jamila and Amain, isolating herself from family and friends. Despite her continued involvement in the summer softball league, it did not go unnoticed by her teammates, her coach and the softball community that there was a shift in Jennifer's way of being – now quiet, and at times distracted and expressionless. This shadow of Jennifer was a dark contrast to her usual ebullient self and it produced a pall amongst all. Her parents also took notice and ushered her into grief counselling sessions with the well-respected Dr. Paslowski, who put forth her best efforts in providing a safe place and encouraged her to open up about her loss and her feelings in general. She willingly attended, and acknowledged her sense of sadness, yet even in a supportive environment, she continued to remain detached and morose. There seemed to exist in her a void where previously a willing communication and her signature robust zest and agency occupied. When once her bright eyes shone with lively light, they now they appeared hollow and vacant. Despite support and the love and concern of her family, Jennifer's spirit appeared to be broken, shattered, crushed.

Jennifer went through the motions of biking to and from her softball practice every day at Morrow Park, a fifteen minute ride from home. Apart from spending time with Amain and Jamila who acted as portals to her Grandmother and Ranelle, it was her daily bike rides that provided the only seemingly tolerable flashes of freedom in her day – a time she spent moving forward with her foot on the pedal, the intake of breath in her lungs, and the beat of her heart. With the absence of all of the emotionally-colored and concerned people suffocating her physical space, Jennifer gave free reign to her imagination and to entertain random thoughts of abstract shapes she saw in the natural environment as she rode quietly along. Trees would become fractal like a Picasso image (though Jennifer wasn't huge on Picasso's art); houses and buildings appeared hyper-sharp and otherworldly like a prairie landscape painted by artist David Thauberger, with a stark contrast between light and shadow; reflections and vivid sunbursts were like the glow of a Bill Viola video installation... Monuments would become masculine and insistent on themselves like a Richard

Sierra sculpture, and home gardens appeared as unalloyed and humorous as Victor Cicansky's colorful works of clay garden art. In addition to her interest in horticulture, Jennifer pored over art books, both historical and contemporary. She had a particularly strong interest in western and prairie regional art and secretly thought she might like to settle in Big Sky Saskatchewan where her other natural love, sunsets, lived as a surreal character hovering the flatlands like a bright, gentle anvil slashing colors through the atmosphere, reminding us that the celestial skin of the heavens offers both void and volume.

At other times on her rides, Jennifer would meander through the cul de sacs of a quiet neighbourhood or take a detour on a curving road rather than take a shorter, straight line route to practice. She found within these private moments a time to feel grief and longing for her lost friend, Ranelle. She could mourn and remember her friend in her own way, and in her own solitary time.

She recalled a series of prank calls they made in middle school, once to Luke Kapinski who had a crush on Ranelle and wrote her silly poetry. They kind of felt badly afterwards, which at the age of thirteen is probably a good sign that they were developing an inner, moral compass. Luke wasn't exactly a popular or social boy in school, which is why the girls felt some penitence for their juvenile act. However, they felt fine about prank-calling Vanessa Balfour, the most stuck-up and two-faced gossip at Lakefield High School. It was Ranelle who disguised her voice pretending to be a boy they knew Vanessa liked, and they took delight in the deception.

Jennifer reminisced on their watercolor painting phase a few years back. Ranelle liked to paint flowers and she painted Jennifer a vibrantly colored yellow tulip which still hung in her bedroom. She recalled the many fun times they spent meandering through the library, loitering in the mall and of course the annual holiday on the first week in August spent at Ranelle's family cottage in the Muskokas. That last summer they experimented by kissing and broke out in gales of laughter, feeling silly, slightly awkward but memorable. As August approached, the memory of her passing stung like acid rain on her skin. In a rotating montage of memories passing through her mind, time was allotted for Jennifer to grieve and eventually to cry. And all of this came to her with the soft rotations and the swish of her bike wheels on the pavement, without



the prompting of well-meaning people who diminished her sense of self with weapons of good intentions.

One day in late July, Jennifer returned home from one of her extended bike rides. She would typically return home and immediately retreat to her bedroom where she would sit looking out of her window, chin resting in the palms of her hands, and alternately she would softly gaze at the petals of Amain and Jamila. Through her small sized window, the landscape beyond was a cinematic backdrop while non-evasive, *lo-fi pop bedroom pop music* with heavy reverb and suggestively contemplative but practically inaudible lyrics, thinned the air. On this particular late afternoon, however and to her horror, she noticed that Jamila had fallen ill; delicate clefts furrowed, a once-matted hue discolored, and most worriedly, no longer stood symmetrical and straight, but draped over like an ill hospital patient spewing over the edge of the bedside. This alarming sight ruptured Jennifer's heart and salty tears began their journey down her cheeks. She had lost her best friend in mortal life, but the tulip was her surrogate host, and it appeared that Jamila was now slowly dying. Jennifer fell to the floor and remained there softly weeping. All the pain and confusion she felt when Ranelle left the world had now found new microphones to announce their punishing riddle of disappointment and uncertainty.

Over the course of the next week, Jennifer worked to revive the tulip in the hope it could live for its full tulip lifespan. She added plant nutrients, repotted the earth, and changed the water volume. While Amain stood strong and healthy, Jamila lost more coloration and drooped down even further. Jennifer also fell deeper and deeper into the basement of her sorrow and mistrust with the universe. Her family grew more concerned for her mental health and were still unable to penetrate Jennifer's darkness to engage in a dialogue. The sunsets seemed to disconnect from her consciousness, and Jennifer's bike rides became more of a chore than therapy. Helplessness and hurt engulfed her and by extension the household.

Jennifer was still attending sessions with her therapist, Dr. Paslowski. Her family insisted she go despite a lack of improvement in her wellbeing.

*"It will take", her father kept saying. "It will take eventually".*

During one of her sessions in the first week in August, (typically a week Jennifer would have spent at Ranelle's family cottage), Jennifer sat in the vinyl blue armchair in the therapist's office, forcing herself to exist in the clench of therapy. She yielded short, blunt and unenthusiastic responses to her therapist's questions, if she spoke at all.

*"What's been going on at home this week?"* Dr. Paslowski asked. In a rare moment of effort, Jennifer sighed and then murmured: *"One of my tulips I named Jamila, is dying. I've tried everything. Everything goes away from me."*

Dr. Paslowski looked pointedly at Jennifer for a moment. While softening her expression, she adjusted her navy Burberry glasses and then he spoke to her again.

*"You have quite a passion for tulips, don't you? You have even given names for your tulips – they must mean something special to you."*

While stricken with deep sadness and some resistance, Jennifer could only whisper: *"Yes I love them"*.

Dr. Paslowski continued: *"Tell me Jennifer, what is it you love about your tulips?"*

Jennifer sighed and prepared to deliver her well-rehearsed answer, but paused instead and thought – how dare anyone not understand the depths of her tulip tender heart? Then in a perfectly paced monotone voice, she described their history, complexity and duality, even the fashion punchline, which in turn was spoken more like a reverent eulogy for a waning plant. After a short interlude Dr. Paslowski firmly and diplomatically asked another question:

*"That is a very thoughtful set of answers, Jennifer. I'm left curious though. Are there any other reasons you love tulips?"*

Jennifer sat in stillness and silence. Inwardly she was shocked. How dare her perfectly researched honed and practised answers not elicit admiration! What other person could provide a multiple checkmark response to the subject of tulips! She felt one part insulted, but also couldn't help but feel a tad curious that perhaps there were more genuine, less performed and personal meanings she hadn't expressed. Her face changed from expressionless to highly charged, and before she could respond, her therapist brought the session to a close. Jennifer

didn't know if this made her feel relieved or anxious. Very confusing.

Dr. Paslowski finished with these words: *"I'm going to leave you with that question, Jennifer. Sometimes when we examine what we are truly passionate about in life, we find hidden meanings, metaphors, or an abstracted understanding of ourselves. It is something for you to ponder before we meet again. Think about it, and I will see you next week"*.

Jennifer got up and left the nouveau minimalist décor of the therapist's office. She did think about it. How could she not? Yes, she was frustrated and partly disappointed that her string of articulate answers, spoken in whatever tone, didn't evoke the same pep her usual audiences respond with. Was she just being humored or patronized by family and friends who found her passion rather precociously "adorable"? Was she going through predictable motions? Was she performing? Was Dr. Paslowski simply a cold and detached therapist who was disinterested in validating her intelligence? More importantly, was there perhaps an unseen truth in flower petals – what was it about tulips? As she unlocked her bike and pedaled her way home, she continued to contemplate all of this within the humid blanket of an August's most dreary day.

As she pedaled on, the dreariness she felt began to lift when small spots of glimmer shone through the cloud cover. She continued deep in thought. For years she researched and devoted her attention to all things tulip so that she would be considered the expert, one who was esteemed, like her grandmother. To rethink her hard-earned truths proved difficult. In order to explore the fodder in her mind she imagined a garden of tulips proliferating and expanding within a time of renewal in the spring months. One after another, buds burst into the world growing the tulip universe – full of color and potential. Expansion! That was it! Her visualization gave her a way to challenge her thinking, and so her inner dialogue took flight.

*"Expansion! That's what I'm doing. It's not that my answers are wrong, or not enough, but I am expanding on them. I'm older now and have had experiences. Maybe there's more to tulips than I thought?"*

Deep down she began to hope there was more. Her musing turned toward expressions of art.

As she biked along she felt for the first time in many weeks, that the neighbourhoods and natural landscape took vivid and colorful twists as roads became empty and dusty like a Nam June Pak film; people were characters performing themselves under pressure within a Warhol reel; the landscape appeared vividly blotchy like a Janice Warner painting; and the air was thick with dusk and history in a museum restoration space. Jennifer spent one summer as a student in a restoration project at the AGO in Toronto, which she considered a culturally rich experience.

Eventually she stopped pedalling and parked her bike against a compost bin, not far from Morrow Park. The rain had stopped its soft drizzle, and the lifeless day began to tease a soft flickering trailer of fair weather with a clearing at the edge of the sky. She gazed at the green compost bin and saw a cluster of fruit flies hovering above, flittering in every direction like filthy snowflakes all connected to one large mass.

Jennifer gently spoke out to the hoard of flies and was suddenly charged with a poetic upheaval of emotion and empathy:

*“Oh diffused and impenetrable fruit flies, so insistent to work hard at appearing to be working at all; left, straight, right, straight; without agency or purpose. Worst of all, without appearing to be giving or receiving compassion. I observe and acknowledge you, fruit flies, because you just are. Perhaps you are unable to grasp your veil of purposelessness. I will take purpose in observing you.”*

Jennifer pushed on, now energized by her mundane but sensitive encounter with a swarm of fruit flies. She thought to herself:

*“Fruit flies don’t even live long. Forty to fifty days if I recall. Such a little time in this world, performing as a living fixture of nuisance, and then gone!”*

There was something innately sad about this thought, but it was also reaffirming. Surely she had experienced great love and joy in her life in stages, some lasting and others cut short. More than fifty days that’s for sure. She took a left on Carver Street intending to make her way back home to think about the tulip question. Carver Street features a parade of well-manicured homes with front yard gardens. She took notice of Mrs. Connor’s much talked about, garden-magazine style floral display next to and surrounding the gazebo that her late

husband Chauncie had built before he passed away from heart complications some years ago. It was a tragic event, and what seemed to make it worse was that Mrs. Connor didn't seem to have the support of family or friends after her husband's passing. Jennifer didn't know too much about Mrs. Connor, only that she lived alone and was rarely seen with anyone. She did, however, appear to take much joy and show much tenderness in nursing her colorful flower garden, tulips included of course. When the garden would go to sleep for the winter months, Mrs. Connor was rarely seen. I guess the short annual lifespan of her garden was enough to keep her moving along in life. Just then Jennifer felt a stroke of her heart.

*"Oh my".*

*"The short lifespan of a seasonal garden – only two or three months for a tulip...this is my love. One of the reasons I love tulips is their willingness to blossom and flourish even with the scourge of impermanence. For a brief time I get to enjoy each unique tulip. I get it! Nature's cycle of life, death and renewal. This doesn't make any single tulip any less ordinary or disposable. Tulips! I love tulips. They leave me, but more arrive when I need them most."*

Jennifer's thoughts began to shift toward Ranelle. They had spent their sweet-tooth adolescence and early adulthood together, navigating foliage and frost. Ranelle left tragically and Jennifer bore a wound that may never fully heal. But there were countless sentimental, tragicomical, beautiful and worthwhile stories in the curvatures and textures of the wound. Certainly there exists a way to honor Ranelle's memory, even feigning the absoluteness of Jamila. Ranelle's spirit will live on in spiritual rebirths, reincarnations and iterations. Perhaps in time the memories and recollections she had for Ranelle may become a temporal place of safety and enjoyment for her, if she could transform her perspective. Her memories would always be romanticized, subjective and selective, which is a lofty human impulse – no escaping that. She was determined to change not her emotions, but rather, how she related to her emotions and that would take time. Like the saying goes: *"You can't rush a cat"*. Now that she thought about it, Jennifer loved cats, and thought about getting one of her own. She hadn't thought about it for some time and the idea began to take root in her mind.

Before becoming fully engaged in cat dreams, Jennifer reflected on Mrs. Connor for just a while longer as she rode her bike away from Carver Street. It was sad that Mrs. Connor was living a visibly reclusive life and it seemed that her only friends were the blooms that grew in her garden. Jennifer suddenly felt very fortunate for the people she had in her life: her family, the softball team, the services of a professional psychotherapist, and her Grandma was doing fine out on the west coast. Although her family at times were overbearing and unaware of her internal struggles, they were always there for her and that wasn't to be taken lightly. Maybe more communication with them would make them more aware of what Jennifer really needed. She longed for a willingness to come closer to her pain: to acknowledge and recognize it, to honor it and to respond to it with compassion. She realized how difficult it was to sit with the burden of her family's pain and concern for her in addition to the turmoil of her own feelings.

Jennifer understood tulips. She had love and compassion for tulips. True compassion as Jennifer understood meant sitting with her own pain and the pain of others. It ends the cruelty of denial and indifference.

Jennifer had now been biking for quite a while – longer than she anticipated. She was calm and content. She dropped her bike lazily on the driveway. It was around a quarter to seven in the evening and she was feeling emotionally spent. She recalled the family had gone to a barbeque at a neighbour's down the street; Jennifer was invited of course, but nobody expected her to make an appearance, especially after a session of therapy.

The air felt lighter in the house. She removed her damp runners and made her way toward her bedroom. Upon entering her room, Jennifer was surprised and amazed to find Jamila had lifted her stem at least three-quarters of an inch upwards, seeming to reverse its decline. A main remained next to Jamila, supportively as this healing took place. The coloration and turgor were restored in the stem and flower. However long the two tulips had left together, it appeared encouraging that they would once again stand aligned and hopeful. Jennifer was moved to tears toward her temporal friends and added a touch of water to the pot. She gazed at the tulips, meditating on them as she had many times before. Through her bedroom window she noticed the clouds were breaking up and the skies opened up to a brilliant sunset.

*“The sunset...does it begin when the sun rises, similarly as my death began the day I was born? Or is it a more measured exactitude of descent once the volume begins to power down? Does it matter? Maybe. Regardless, this one sunset with its vivacious beauty nourishes my spirit. She gazed and reflected while waning shards of golden low light washed over her, comforting her as she received her truths rising up from her internal landscape.*

Later on as darkness fell, Jennifer opened up her laptop. She pulled up a hyperlink that she saved: “Peterborough Cat Rescue”. Anticipating a long scroll of surly felines, a cat immediately revealed herself: a small Turkish Van, mostly grey with mysterious, focused green eyes. Her name was Patty. She was perfect, except for her name. From her peripheral vision, Jennifer caught sight of the tulip watercolor hanging on her wall – the one Ranelle painted for her.

*“I think I’ll rename her Ranelle”.*

At that moment Jennifer heard the front door open and shut with a cacophony of family noises filling the air. She got up from her computer, stretched her arms, yawned and extended a graceful stretch like a cat. She arched a preparatory but genuine smile on her face as she took a deep breath and headed toward the sounds of support.



Evan Tyler 2020