

mindy
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clark

the
trouble
with tulip



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THE TROUBLE WITH TULIP

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Jo Tulip was suffocating.

As the digital clock glowed 11:48 P.M. from her bedside table—fully two hours after she had climbed in bed and turned out the lights—Jo finally threw off her covers and sat up. Her mind was so full of thoughts and her house so full of people that she felt as though she could hardly breathe.

Air. She needed to get some air.

Jo pulled some clothes on over her pajamas, slipped her feet into her sneakers, and grabbed the rechargeable flashlight from the plug across the room. She tiptoed through her small house, passing one snoozing body in the spare bedroom, another on the couch, and more in sleeping bags on the floor of the living room. Quietly, she continued to the back door, grabbed her key ring from the hook, and stepped into the cool September night, pulling the door shut behind her.

Already, just being outside, she felt better.

Inhaling deeply, Jo tucked the keys into her pocket, clicked on the flashlight, and made her way along the side of the house to the driveway. She followed it forward to the road, intending to take a short walk around the block. It was a cool night, very peaceful, and her hope was that the air would clear her head and help her relax.

It was no wonder she was feeling crowded. When her fiancé, Bradford, had asked if she would mind hosting a few of his relatives for the wedding weekend, she didn't know he would be sticking her with the intrusive branch of the family. They were friendly enough, she supposed, but they had scattered their belongings from one end of her home to the other, and their three boys were so wild that they had already broken the doorbell, a planter by the back door, and the towel rack in the bathroom.

Those same boys had looked so innocent as they lay dreaming on the living room floor, but Jo knew looks were deceiving. Come morning they would no doubt be at it again, probably setting her house on fire as their beleaguered mother tried to make cheese omelettes.

Oddly, though Jo was barely tolerating them, the whole family had really taken to her, which made it even more difficult to deal with their chaos. The boys were constantly fighting for her attention, and their mom seemed eager to become friends and confidants. Already, the whole family was trying to make elaborate plans for Jo and Bradford to come up to Connecticut and visit with them. Jo was pleased that they saw her as a welcome addition to the family, but if she had her way, that visit wouldn't be happening any time soon.

Autumn leaves crunched under her feet as she walked down the sidewalk, her stride taking on a soothing rhythm. She practiced some deep breathing: in, out, in, out. Jo usually preferred in-line skating to walking, but if anyone were to glance out of their window at this hour and see her whizzing past on a pair of 'blades, they might think she was crazy! Better to be out for a simple stroll. And it was a lovely night. She reached the end of the street and turned right, careful not to trip where the sidewalk buckled near the big maple tree.

Jo lived in a neighborhood that stretched for many blocks, a series of modest two- and three-bedroom homes with tidy yards on streets that were all named after trees. The town of Mulberry Glen (also named after a tree; the founding fathers hadn't exactly been a creative bunch) was a quiet place where neighbors mostly knew each other and a trip to the pharmacy or dime store sometimes took twice as long as necessary because of all the friendly encounters along the way. Jo loved living there, and though Bradford hoped eventually to convince her that they should move to New York City, where he worked, she didn't think that would ever happen. Better that he try to find a job a little closer to Mulberry Glen, Pennsylvania, which was a good three and a half hours from New York. Where they lived was just one of the issues that remained to be worked out between them once they were married.

Married.

Tomorrow Jo was getting married—well, technically, *today* she was getting married. A strange wave of apprehension rolled through her at that thought, but she swallowed the feeling away, as she had all week. She didn't know why she was feeling so anxious about it. The event was planned out thoroughly to the most minute detail. Jo assumed her

midnight anxiety was simply standard prewedding jitters—and that as soon as she stood at the altar with Bradford and they were pronounced husband and wife, all would be well.

Husband and wife, husband and wife, she told herself in a simple cadence as her feet struck the pavement. The air felt so good and the night sky was so soothing that when she reached the next block, she kept going straight rather than turning to round the block toward home. She would just make a bigger square, looping down Weeping Willow to where it met Dogwood. Wildly, Jo wondered for a moment if she could simply keep walking all night. She could stroll all over town and finally walk right to the church and all the way down the aisle. The deed would be done and all of this worrying about it would have been for naught. Then again, her absence from the morning appointment at the hairdresser might send her mother into heart failure—not to mention that showing up at the altar in jeans over pajamas would be a sad waste of a really pretty wedding dress.

Jo reached the next corner and turned on Weeping Willow Way, the sound of her steps causing a cat to dart out from behind a trash can. Startled, Jo faltered a bit and then kept walking, glad that Mulberry Glen was such a safe town. She had taken plenty of late night walks last January, when her grandmother had been slowly dying and Jo's only solace was to wait until the night nurse arrived and then head outside to burn off some steam. Jo had walked almost every night back then, slowly coming to appreciate the darkness, the calm, the quiet.

Sometimes, as she went, she tried prayer-walking, where she would lift up to God the members of the households she passed. But invariably, her mind would become distracted: *Oh, Lord, please bless the family who lives in this house, and I wish they knew that they could clean that filthy siding simply by using a long-handled car washing brush attached to an ordinary garden hose...* Try as she might, Jo always had trouble keeping her mind from drifting toward household hints.

She was thinking of some other housecleaning techniques when, up ahead, she heard voices. As she kept going, she could tell that they were coming from a home on the left. Jo couldn't hear what was being said, only that someone was shouting in angry tones. Most of the other houses in the neighborhood were dark, but this one was lit up like a Christmas tree. The shades were all drawn, however, so as she walked past, she couldn't catch a glimpse inside.

From what she could recall, an older woman named Edna Pratt lived there. Edna was a fan of the Tips from Tulip column, though she and Jo's grandmother had never exactly been friends beyond a hello in the grocery store and an occasional chat about cleaning methods. Jo tried to avoid the woman when she could. Edna's daughter, Sally, was important in politics—a senator or a congresswoman or something like that—and it was always a bit tedious to hear Edna go on and on about Sally's latest accomplishments.

Jo kept walking, the sounds of the voices fading away by the time she reached Dogwood Drive. She turned right, feeling not a hint of tiredness, wishing she had taken four blocks instead of two. As she turned on to Oak Street and reached her own house, she decided to go around once more, this time at a slow jog. Maybe that would wear her out. Holding the flashlight a bit higher, she began jogging, passing her own dark home and those of her neighbors. Turning the corner, she took a big hop over the buckled sidewalk and kept going. The running felt good, and by the time she reached Weeping Willow a second time, her heart was pumping strongly, her breathing even and hard.

As she took the corner, she realized a car was coming up Weeping Willow in her direction, moving much more quickly than it should have been. Jo hated that, hated the way someone would willfully break the speed limit in a nice little neighborhood, just because it was late at night and they thought no one was watching. Well, she was watching. She glared at the car as it came toward her, aiming her flashlight directly toward the driver. It was probably some teenager, thinking he had the road to himself.

Suddenly, the car screeched to a stop.

The action was so odd that for a moment Jo slowed. She glanced to her right and then her left, but the street was deserted except for her.

The car continued to sit in the middle of the road, lights on, engine running. Jo felt a shiver begin at the base of her neck. Were they waiting for her?

Or did the fact that they were sitting there in the middle of the road, engine running, have nothing to do with her at all?

Feeling very uncomfortable but trying to act nonchalant, she made a simple U-turn on the sidewalk and began jogging in the opposite direction, toward home.

Turning left at the corner, she listened for the car but it still hadn't moved forward. She kept glancing back as she ran, but it wasn't until she

was two blocks away, at the corner of her own street, that she noticed the car finally pulling out onto the main road. It made a right turn, away from her, and in the darkness she couldn't even tell what kind of vehicle it was.

Jo slowed to a walk for her cooldown, and as she covered the half block to her own house, she tried to think of different reasons a car would just stop in the middle of the road like that for what had to have been four or five minutes. She decided it was one of two things. Either they needed to pause and consult a map, or they had spilled something, like a soda or a cup of coffee, and they had to stop and clean it up. (Jo always suggested keeping a hand towel under the passenger seat for just such an emergency.)

By the time she reached her own home, she thought of the most likely scenario: *They* had been scared of *her!* After all, what kind of nut goes running at midnight—and then has the nerve to shine a flashlight in your face? Smiling to herself, Jo put the incident out of her mind. There were more pressing events going on there, and they all had to do with a certain guy at a certain church at a certain time, to whom she would say a certain “I do.”

Suddenly, a wave of tiredness swept over Jo, and she thought she might finally be able to sleep. She decided not to go back to her bedroom but instead to the little building out behind her house, the one that served as her home office. There was a perfectly good couch inside, and she might do better to catch some z's there. She just couldn't face the crowd sleeping in her living room.

Jo crunched through the leaves in the driveway, used her key to unlock the door, and stepped inside without turning on the light. She had been in there only a few hours before, doing some final paperwork, so she knew everything was neat and clean and put away until after the honeymoon.

The couch was against the back wall, between the modified test kitchen to the right and the desk area to the left. Breathing in the sweet, spicy smell of her favorite room in the world, Jo crossed to the side closet, dug out a pillow and a blanket, and arranged them on the couch. This room was such a familiar, beloved place that she felt herself relax almost instantly. She pulled off her clothes, still wearing her pajamas underneath, and did a few stretches to complete her cooldown.

Finally, she laid down on the couch and pulled the blanket up to her neck. Despite the tensions of the day and all the thoughts that had been

swirling around in her mind, Jo began to drift off almost immediately. In the quiet and the darkness, her breathing grew even and soft as she left behind the stresses of her world and slid into the deep, deep sleep that had been eluding her all week. She slept soundly, unaware that all was not well in Mulberry Glen.

Two blocks away, Edna Pratt lay dead on her dining room floor.

TIPS FROM TULIP

Dear Readers, this week as we feature classic letters from the past, enjoy this exchange from 1949.

Dear Tulip,

My husband works as a funeral director and has to comfort people a lot, so he's always coming home with women's lipstick stains on his collar. What's the best way for me to get them out?

—*Stumped in Sarasota*

Dear Stumped,

Lipstick creates an oil-based stain, so water will only make it worse. Try rubbing in some vegetable oil and letting it sit. After 20 minutes, sponge the area with some ammonia, then finally scrub with some dish soap. Launder as usual.

And may I add: Be a Smart Chick! Ask other funeral directors' wives if they're facing the same laundry problem you are. If not, then you might need to wise up and realize that your husband's idea of giving comfort to the bereaved is dead wrong.

—*Tulip*