

blind
dates can
be murder

mindy
starns
clark



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Welcome to www.TipsfromTulip.com



Dear Reader,

I'm so pleased that you are here! Do come back often to check out the latest in household hints.

In the meantime, please enjoy my daily web diary (also known as a "blog") below. Feel free to post comments and questions, and remember that no household problem is insurmountable—as long as you apply good common sense and a touch of creativity.

Have a blessed day!

Jo Tulip



TipsfromTulip Blog



March 23



Hi, friends. Glad you decided to stop in today. Here's a crazy question for you: What would it take to get you to sign up for a computer dating service?

For me, the decision was partly based on peer pressure. If you've been keeping up with this blog, you know that there's a new place in town called Dates&Mates, and ever since they opened their doors last month, my girlfriends have been itching to give it a try. Last week, they finally dragged me in there with them, and we all signed up en masse.

Why am I going into all of this again? Because I'm mortified to say that Dates&Mates found a match for me, and I have my first date with him tonight! My mystery man and I haven't met in person—or even spoken on the phone—but the agency has coordinated a dinner for us at six o'clock at the local steakhouse. Right now I'm more nervous than a giraffe at a ceiling fan store! According to Dates&Mates, the guy is 6'2", 190 pounds, age 29. Sounds good to me. We seem to have a lot in common, so I'm hoping for the best. I'll be sure to post an entry tomorrow and let you know how it goes.

At least I have a great outfit, thanks to the friends who forced me to go shopping once they learned about the date. We found a gorgeous emerald green sweater, which I'm pairing with a white shirt and black slacks. My shoes are especially cute, and I saved money by picking them up secondhand at the local thrift store—which, by the way, leads to a handy tip, how to stretch out shoes that are too tight in the toes:

Put a heavy-duty zip-closure plastic bag into the shoe, pressing it with your hands against the toe. Carefully fill the bag with water until the toe area is full, then zip it shut. (To be extra careful, you might want to double-bag it.) Repeat for the other shoe. Set the pair on a cookie sheet or baking dish and put them into the freezer for at least twenty-four hours. As the water freezes, it will expand, stretching the toes.

Here's hoping I have a good time, and if not, well, at least that will give me something to talk about in tomorrow's blog entry. For now, I'm off to take my shoes out of the freezer so they'll have plenty of time to defrost.

With cold feet regardless,

Jo

*Tips from Tulip: Combining yesterday's common sense
with tomorrow's technology . . . to solve the problems of today*

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March 24



Jo Tulip didn't know if she was ready for this or not. Still, she pulled open the heavy wooden door of Tenderloin Town and stepped inside, letting it fall into place behind her. She had come early so that she could get settled at the table and collect her thoughts—and still have enough time to make a last-minute escape if she lost her nerve.

She approached the hostess and asked for the reservation for Dentyne, party of two. Sounded like a chewing gum to her, but that was the name Dates&Mates had given her: Brock Dentyne. Jo would have canceled the blind date based solely on the name, but she didn't want to seem shallow.

The bouncy blonde checked something off her list, grabbed two brown leather menus, and led Jo through the noisy room to a table for two near the back. Once Jo was seated, the hostess disappeared, only to be replaced by a deeply tanned young man wearing the steakhouse uniform of Western wear complete with hat and bandanna.

"Something to drink while you're waiting for your party?" he asked, flashing an unnaturally bright smile.

"Iced tea, please," Jo replied, resisting the urge to tell him he ought to back off on the tooth whitener—not to mention the self-tanning lotion. "With lemon."

"You got it."

Jo watched him walk away, wondering where waiters went on dates. Did they go to restaurants? Or was that just too much like going back to work?

Jo opened the menu and scanned the choices, but her mind was too scattered to focus. Absently, she reached up and ran a hand over her

flyaway blond hair, wondering what Brock Dentyne was going to think of her. Would he be pleased? Disappointed?

Did it matter?

The one fact she hadn't admitted on her blog was her main motivation for doing this: Her agent wanted her to explore the current dating scene for publicity purposes. Jo's posts online frequently discussed relationships, and her words seemed to resonate with many of her readers. Apparently, there was always a sharp spike of activity on her website when she wrote about her love life (or lack thereof). According to her agent, the dating angle seemed to be such an effective tool that he wanted her to expand upon it greatly.

Of course, that meant Jo needed to start dating again, something she purposely hadn't done for six months—and for good reason. But once her girlfriends started getting worked up about Dates&Mates, she reluctantly decided to join them and sign up herself.

Now here she was, surprised at how she was feeling. Up until today, this had been more of a business move than a personal one. So why was she so nervous, like a girl on her first date? She was twenty-seven years old, for goodness' sake. She'd certainly had her share of dates.

On the other hand, after six months of specifically *not* dating, Jo wasn't sure if she remembered how to be interesting and engaging. In fact, she wasn't sure if she knew how to converse about anything at all beyond the topics of her dog, her job, and her friends.

Jo took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She couldn't believe she was really doing this. She was out on a date for the first time since last September, when she was jilted at the altar by her groom.



Danny couldn't believe Jo was doing this.

His hands were on a basketball, but his mind was across town, on a blind date with Jo. For months—ever since the groom had taken a powder at Jo's wedding—Danny had listened to his best friend work through her issues about love and romance and men. For months Danny had heard her talk about her temporary “moratorium on dating” while she attempted to fix what was wrong in her heart that kept leading her to make such stupid choices in men. For months he had loved her in silence, waiting for the moment when she would announce that she was

ready to start dating again, so he could tell her that he loved her, that he wanted to spend a lifetime showing her just how much.

He'd had big plans, all right: The minute she was ready, he was going to sweep Jo Tulip off her feet, showing her that the only man in the world for her had been the one who was there all along. He had no doubt that she loved him too—she just needed help understanding what was in her heart.

“Yo! Earth to Danny! We playing or what?”

Danny's head snapped up to see four other guys poised for action, looking at him expectantly.

“Sorry,” he said, dribbling the ball.

With a vengeance, he made his way down the court, aiming for a layup, his eyes on the rough gray net hanging from the rim. As he went, he pictured himself as he had been last Saturday, when he was working at Dates&Mates as a photographer, taking portraits of their clients for their computer profiles. It was a new photography gig for him, just three hours a week, but lucrative. Jo Tulip had strolled into his makeshift photography studio there precisely at 10:30 AM, and Danny had smiled, telling her he couldn't chat for long because he had a 10:30 appointment.

“I know you do, silly,” she replied. “*I'm* your ten thirty appointment.”

Dumbfounded, Danny had gone through the motions of a photography sitting, asking her questions as he did so, trying to ascertain when and how she had come to the decision to sign up with the dating service. A dating service! She talked about her agent, Milton, and her website traffic and the group of girlfriends who had been pressuring her to do it anyway, and all he could think was, *Don't you know that the only man you'll ever need is already smack-dab in the middle of your life?*

Danny knew he needed to tell Jo how he felt about her, but he had been too shocked and tongue-tied to say anything at that moment. In the week since then he still had not found the nerve or opportunity to say the words.

Why hadn't he said the words?

Danny leapt up into the air and slammed the ball through the hoop as hard as he could. When he came down, he realized that the staccato squeaks of rubber soles on the hardwood had stopped—and two of the guys were on the floor.

He hesitated.

“Did I do that?” he asked, gesturing toward them.

“Yeah,” his brother-in-law Ray replied in a low voice, pulling him aside. “Come on, bro. Lighten up. This is just a pickup game, not NBA tryouts.”

“Foul,” someone yelled.

Personal foul, Danny thought as the other team threw the ball back inbounds. *I hope Jo doesn't encounter any personal fouls tonight.*

If she does, I sure hope she's playing good defense.



Jo spotted a squat, older man with a bald head and a bulbous nose waving at her from across the restaurant. At first, she thought he might be waving to someone behind her. But as he made his way toward her, Jo's heart leapt into her throat. Was this—could it possibly be—her date?

No way.

“Jo Tulip, right? Hi, how ya doin’? I knew it was you right off, soon as I came in the door.”

He sat without waiting for her reply, picked up the napkin roll in front of him, and let the silverware clatter out onto the table. Then he tucked the napkin into his shirt, at the neckline, and sucked in a deep, ragged breath.

“Scuse me a sec,” he rasped as he pulled a small yellow device from his pocket. “My asthma's been acting up all week.”

He stuck the device into his mouth and inhaled deeply. Jo was speechless, her mind racing in a thousand different directions. This was her *match*? This was the man the computer said would be physically, intellectually, and emotionally compatible with her? That was impossible! The guy was twice her age—not to mention half her height. Surely, there must be some mistake.

Closing her mouth, Jo could feel the heat rush to her face, embarrassed at her own reaction. She knew you shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

But what a cover!

“Before you say anything,” he told her, tucking away the inhaler and holding up two stubby hands. “I lied about my height on the application. Lied about my age too. But the rest was all true, I swear.”

At that point, Jo swallowed, finding her voice.

"I'm sorry if I seem surprised," she said, "but I'm only twenty-seven years old. Doesn't this seem vaguely inappropriate to you?"

"I'm fifty-four," he replied, shrugging. Then he grinned. "Works for me."



Lettie positioned herself near the side cash register and waited for the chance to make her move. She usually wrapped things up and slipped out of town on Fridays, and if all went well tonight would be no exception.

Since coming to the Jersey Shore two weeks ago, Lettie had been working three part-time jobs—at a gas station, a beauty parlor, and here at the discount store. Though she had put in hours at all three places, the jobs were merely a front for her *real* work. After tonight, that work would be done and it would be time to move on to somewhere new.

Again.

With a heavy sigh, Lettie pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and watched as a group of college-aged kids came into the store. Though she was only twenty-three herself, watching them giggle and preen made her feel decades older. *Had she ever been that young?*

Had she ever been carefree?

Lettie hated working this particular cash register because there was a mirror across the aisle, above the cosmetics display. She didn't have to look in a mirror to know what she would see there: An unattractive girl in thick glasses, wearing washed out, shapeless clothes and sporting long, stringy bangs that covered half her face. When she was a girl, the other kids would tease her for wearing her hair down in her eyes, but that was the style she preferred. There was something quite comforting about being able to hide behind her hair. If she could, Lettie would spend her life in hiding.

"Hey, guys," one of the young men called, pausing at a display rack. "I told you they'd have flip-flops here."

The whole group seemed a little drunk, which might provide a useful distraction for the manager. Sure enough, when they finished choosing flip-flops, they moved on to the toy aisle, where they began fooling around with the rubber ball display. Lettie watched the manager head in their direction, and then she quickly went to work.

It didn't take long. She reached for the credit card machine, flipped it over, and slipped away the back panel. Reaching inside, she pulled loose the digital skimmer, a tiny, silver disc no bigger than a watch battery. It may have been small, but that disc contained a record of every single credit card transaction that had been run through the machine in the last two weeks. Lettie had put it there herself, and now it was time to take it out and harvest the data.

She slipped the tiny disc into her pocket, replaced the back panel, and flipped the machine over. Done, and no one the wiser.

The twentysomethings were in the snack aisle now, rounding up a cart full of nuts and chips and salsa, and the manager had given up on trying to contain them. Instead, he was walking in Lettie's direction, his head shiny under a bad comb-over. Self-consciously, she slipped one hand into her pocket and fingered the little disc.

"I hate Friday nights," he whispered to her, his breath sour with the stench of the coffee he nursed day and night. "Brings out all the freaks at the shore."

"It'll be closing time before you know it," she replied softly in consolation, wishing that was true. She was counting the minutes until she was finished and out of there for good.



"You know, you're even better looking than I expected," Brock Dentyne said as he lavishly buttered a roll. "You're one hot mama."

"I...uh...thank you," Jo stammered, unable to form a more intelligent reply. She had received compliments from men before, but no one had ever called her a hot mama, at least not to her face.

"I gotta admit," he added, "I thought I knew what to expect on account of I seen your little photo in the newspaper. The one they put with your column? But it hardly even looks like you."

"Didn't you see my photo at Dates&Mates?"

"Oh," he said, looking a bit startled. "Of course. That too. Did you see mine?"

"They told me you hadn't had yours taken yet."

"Good," he said. "I mean, I *just* had it done, so I guess it ain't in the system yet. But you, you don't look nothing like your picture in the paper."

Jo bit her lip and studied him. The photo in the newspaper was actually of her grandmother, taken when she first created her daily newspaper column, *Tips from Tulip*. Jo had inherited the column last year when her grandmother died, but Jo had kept the original photo in place for continuity's sake.

"That photo's from 1948," Jo replied. "I—"

"No kiddin'?" Brock coughed, interrupting her. "I guess that means you're lying about your age too. Geez, you musta been young when they snapped that picture."

Jo nodded, swallowing the rest of her comment, mentally composing her complaint letter to *Dates&Mates*:

To Whom It May Concern: Your service is a joke, and not only do I want my money back, I want everyone's money back. I want your company cited for incompetence, I want all of your employees to write me a letter of apology, and as long as you're at it, I want you to invent a machine that reverses the rotation of the earth so I can get the last half hour of my life back!

Her date began coughing and wheezing again. For about the fifth time since sitting down, he pulled his inhaler from his pocket and put it in his mouth.

"I'm really sorry about this," he hacked between breaths. "My asthma's been getting worse by the day. Inhaler don't seem to help much."

"No problem."

"This is so embarrassing, and here I am trying to make a good impression."

A good impression? He'd have made a much better impression if he'd been *anything at all* like his profile described!

"Your *Dates&Mates* profile said that you're from Charleston, South Carolina. How come I don't hear any accent?"

He shrugged.

"I been gone from there a long time. It fades away after a while."

"Really."

"Anyway, speaking of your column," he said after he'd gotten his breathing under control, "I gotta tell ya, I'm a big fan. In fact, you're such a celebrity in my family, I can't believe I'm sitting here across from you."

"Yes, the column has been around for a while," Jo said, trying once again to explain. "My grandmother created *Tips from Tulip* and kept it going for more than fifty years. Once I graduated from college, we did it

together. Then, when she got really ill, I took over completely. Now that she has passed away, I do it by myself. I also have a website and a few related projects under development.”

Jo didn't add that in the last six months she had worked hard to update her column and her image, becoming more visible, branching out into other media, and modernizing the topics she covered to make them more relevant to today's man and woman.

“My sister,” he said, “she likes letters about stains. She's got like this vengeance against dirty laundry.”

“Stains can be a challenge.”

“One of her favorite dresses, she got dye on it, like this pinkish-purple dye. Can't get it out to save her life.”

“Dye is particularly tough,” Jo said, relieved to see the waiter approaching with their main course at last. She only had to suffer through the meat and potatoes—and maybe dessert, if he insisted—and then this date would be over. “Dye is specifically made *not* to come out. So when you need to remove it, you're sort of stuck.”

The waiter set the plates down, offered fresh pepper, and twisted the pepper mill over their food.

“What's the matter?” Brock asked the waiter. “Can't afford to buy more than one pepper shaker?” Once the waiter walked away, Brock smirked. “What's with that, anyway? The prices they charge, you'd think they could afford to let you shake out your own pepper.”

Jo kept silent, taking a bite of the filet mignon that was, thankfully, quite good. If she could focus on her meal, she just might get through this.

“Irregardless, like I was saying,” Brock continued, “you got any Tips from Tulip for my sister's dress? She's just about given up.”

“Dye on a dress? It's probably hopeless, but I have a few things she could try.”

Jo went through the list, counting off on her fingers the solutions she might suggest, depending on the fabric: color remover, bleach, three percent hydrogen peroxide.

“But tell her to start with the 'big drip' treatment,” Jo said. “That's what I call it, anyway. You stretch the fabric over a big bowl and secure it with a rubber band. Then you put the bowl in the sink, turn on the faucet where it just drips, and let it drip directly on the stain all night long. Sometimes, that's all it takes. Just tell her to make sure it's cold water.”

“Cold water. Got it. Thanks.”

He went into another coughing fit at that point, but this time the wheezing didn't let up. He whacked the back of his inhaler and made a few quick squirts into the air then looked up at Jo, his eyes wide.

“I think it's empty!” he gasped. Then he clutched at his throat and fell to the floor.



Lettie would have preferred simply to disappear, without offering an explanation for her absence. But if she did that, they might grow suspicious too soon. Better she give a reason why she wouldn't be back, even if it made management angry.

She waited until closing time and then sought out the manager at the other register.

“Um, Mr. Wallace?” she said softly, waiting until he was finished counting out the pennies. “I have to talk to you.”

He glanced up at her and then back at the money tray.

“What? You want a raise already? You only been here two weeks.”

“No, sir. I'm sorry, but I have to give my resignation.”

That stopped him cold. He put his hands on the counter and gave her his undivided attention—his *angry* undivided attention. Uncomfortable under his gaze, she adjusted her glasses and tilted down her face, letting her bangs fall forward.

“Your resignation?” he barked. “You're telling me this now?”

She nodded.

“I'm so sorry. I checked my answering machine on my break, and it looks like I'm gonna get custody of my kids. I gotta get home to Oklahoma right away.”

That seemed to soften him just a bit. She found that stories about kids were the best. In truth, Lettie had no kids—and no plans for any, either. But if management had children themselves, it always seemed the best route to go.

She'd also never been anywhere near Oklahoma. That was her estranged husband's home state, however, so at least she knew enough about it to answer questions if they came up.

“Well, I understand,” he said grudgingly. “But I hate to see you leave. You're a hard worker.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replied. She knew he was just being kind. She wasn’t *that* hard of a worker, intentionally so. Wherever she went, she strove for mediocrity, striking that perfect balance between being just good enough at her job that they wouldn’t fire her prematurely—and just bad enough that they wouldn’t miss her too much, nor remember her very well.

“When are you heading out?”

“I was thinking tonight, or maybe in the morning. I hate leaving you in the lurch like this.”

“We’ll get through it,” he replied, returning to the cash. “Summer’s almost here. I’ll have plenty of applicants soon as school gets out.”

Lettie nodded, right hand in her pocket, fingering the skimmer disc. With the other hand, she reached into her left pocket and pulled out three shiny little figurines, all made from aluminum foil. She had made them on her lunch break, a nervous habit that over the years had become a sort of hobby for her.

“Uh, you said your daughter likes horses, right?” Lettie ventured.

“Obsessed. She’s obsessed with the stupid things,” he answered.

“These are for her.”

Mr. Wallace glanced up and saw what she was holding and took them from her, a soft smile coming to his face.

“Where’d you get these?”

“I made ’em,” she shrugged. “I like to make animals with aluminum foil.”

He held one up and studied it.

“They look so real. You an artist or something?”

“No, sir. I just do it for fun.”

“My son collects frogs. You think you could make him a frog?”

“Sure. There’s a little leftover foil in the trash can. I’ll dig it out.”

“Hey listen, don’t do that. We got foil in aisle nine. Take a roll.”

“A whole roll? I only need a little square.”

“So use the square and keep the rest. Consider it a going away present. You can make a zoo for your own kids.”

Lettie nodded, thrilled at his generous gift, guilty that she had lied. Mr. Wallace wasn’t such a bad guy.

“Hey, Lettie,” he said after she had retrieved the foil and was cutting off some squares to keep in her purse. “You’ll have to give me a forwarding address for your paycheck.”

Lettie nodded to herself, ready with the temporary information. Little did he know, the disc in her pocket held enough financial data to provide hundreds of paychecks and then some.

Too bad most of the profit would go to her boss.



Brock Dentyne thrashed around on the floor, his face a vivid red. Across from them, a woman was so startled she dropped her goblet, which left a splash of scarlet-colored wine down the front of her blouse.

“Nine one one, how can I help you?” a voice said over the phone.

“I need an ambulance,” Jo said. “Quickly. Asthma attack.”

Jo rattled off the address of the restaurant and held on while the operator dispatched emergency services. In the meantime, Brock was still down on the floor, with several people stepping toward him, trying to help. The hospital was only a mile or so away, but Jo knew it could take a few minutes before an ambulance was on the road. Once the call was finished, she stood helplessly by. There wasn’t much she could do, considering that the man’s inhaler was empty.

“Doesn’t anyone here have asthma?” she asked loudly to the restaurant at large. “We need another inhaler!”

“I do, but only when it’s cold outside,” said one person.

“Just when I get around my grandchildren’s gerbils,” said another.

A woman from the next table over was trying mouth-to-mouth, but it wasn’t working.

“His airway is completely blocked,” she said, sitting back on her heels.

“Check his pockets,” Jo said suddenly. “Maybe he has a second inhaler.”

The waiter hesitated and then gamely began patting Brock down as he continued to jerk around on the floor. Jo knew it was probably useless, since Brock would have pulled it out if he’d had it.

She refused to believe that there was nothing she could do to help. She was *Jo Tulip*, after all, all-around resourceful gal in any kind of crisis. Her mind racing, Jo wondered if a tracheotomy might get the man breathing again. Feeling desperate, she grabbed a clean knife and a drinking straw from the table just as a man strode toward her from across the room. He wore the Western uniform of the restaurant, but

with the added distinction of thigh-high leather chaps and a “Manager” tag on his shirt pocket.

“What are you doing?” the fellow demanded, his eyes wide.

“An emergency tracheotomy?” Jo ventured. He stared at her as she tried to explain. “Well, we have to do something. He can’t breathe!”

In the distance, she could hear the faint sounds of a siren.

“The ambulance is coming,” the manager said, waving his hands back and forth like an umpire calling a runner safe. “No emergency surgery in Tenderloin Town.”

Jo looked down at Brock, who had almost stopped moving. The waiter finished going through his pockets, netting nothing but a wallet and a ring of car keys.

“His car,” Jo cried, putting down the knife and straw and grabbing the keys. “Maybe he’s got something in his car.”

She left them all there and ran to the parking lot, grateful that his keychain had a remote control. Running out the door, she pressed the alarm button and then followed the piercing sound to a dark blue sedan. She used the keyless remote to turn off the alarm and unlock the car, and then she swung open the passenger door. Crumbled fast-food wrappers and an empty pizza box littered the passenger seat. Gritting her teeth, Jo rustled through it all looking for another inhaler or some other sort of breathing apparatus. Finding nothing on the front seat, the floor, or in the glove compartment, she turned to the back. She could hear the sirens coming closer as she searched.

Jo lifted a wrinkled, open map and then recoiled, heart pounding. Underneath the map on the floor of the backseat was a gun—a large, black gun. Beside the gun was a coil of rope, duct tape, and a knife.

A gun, a rope, duct tape, and a knife?

Jo stood up straight and watched as the ambulance careened into the parking lot and then came to a stop outside the main door of the restaurant. Emergency personnel spilled from the inside, gurney in hand. A few minutes later, they came back out of the restaurant, Brock’s body on the gurney, working hard to resuscitate him.

Frozen, Jo looked down again at the weapons. She swallowed hard, hoping that somehow they hadn’t been intended for her.