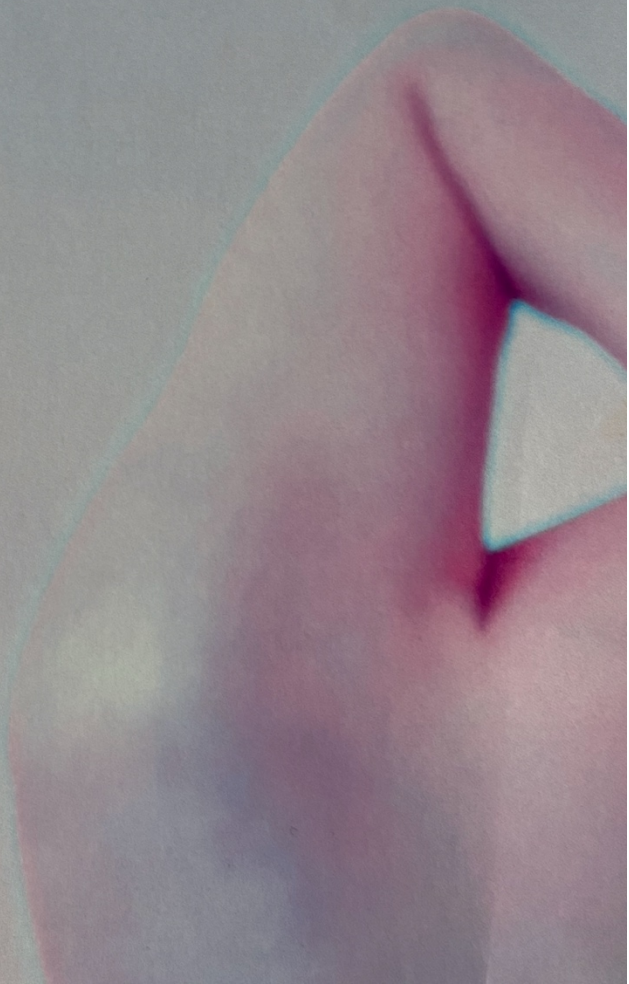


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A Simple Twist of Fate

She grabbed the doorknob, but it wouldn't turn. Justine let out a sort of groaning howl but resisted the urge to bang on the metal siding of the porta potty. The men's door was ajar, and she sucked in a deep breath before going in. Her eyes watered from the smell, though she continued to hold her breath as she raced to get her belt unbuckled and her pants down before she soiled herself. At least she hadn't worn the heavy velvet skirts she'd originally planned to wear, opting instead for simple black jeans and a t-shirt so she could move freely under her cloak—the real centerpiece of the outfit she'd spent months embroidering. She'd wear the velvets in daylight later in the fair.

"Might be a touch of IBS," the doctor had said, but apparently, he knew no remedy for it. Justine would just have to carry on shitting her guts out. She should have had a colonoscopy before she quit her job, but she hadn't thought that far ahead. She hated to admit it, but her mother had been right with her doom and gloom prognostication about how Justine would regret leaving a good job with health insurance. Working freelance had proven to be a double-edged sword. She'd stopped being embarrassed about her frequent, explosive trips to the toilet, and the occasional "accident" that required a change of clothes had become much easier to deal with, but she'd lost her health insurance, and couldn't afford to track down the underlying cause. She'd grown complacent working from home, otherwise, she'd have taken precautions and not found herself in this dreadful situation in a porta potty at the Renaissance Faire's After Hours Fête.

She and her friend Sheila had been planning this evening for months. Sheila, because it was a great party populated by handsome, unattached men, and Justine, to show off her beautiful costumes. Romance was the farthest thing from Justine's mind, but she had slaved over Sheila's dress—a historically accurate French court dress with elaborate gold brocade panels in a rich blue satin. Sheila was the only friend Justine had made at her old job, even though she'd worked there for five years. She'd never been "one of the girls," and when the IBS started, the gossips in accounting she had to waddle past on every single trip to and from the toilet had gotten ugly. First, they'd made up a name tag and stuck it on the furthest stall door—indicating that they didn't want to share the same shitty seat with her. Potpourri and spray deodorizer had materialized next to the toilet over the course of a few weeks with cutesy little PSAs taped to the inside of the door about the importance of handwashing, and that whole group of cookie-cutter

women with their I-want-to-speak-to-the-manager haircuts stopped making eye contact with her after a particularly messy day when she had to leave early. She'd agonized about quitting that job, though she'd been doing graphic design work freelance on the side for a while.

She and Sheila had bonded over the Ren Faire when Justine had brought her sword to work one day and explained that she fenced in a gym after work. Sheila, a brash blond beauty who worked in sales, had badgered Justine until she'd finally invited her to go to the gym with her, and then to the Ren Faire later that year. Sheila had drooled over the men fencing at the gym but wasn't much into getting sweaty herself, but she loved dressing up and turning heads. The Renaissance Faire had become an annual event for the two of them with the pair attending every weekend through the six weeks the fair was open. The opening night fête was always a big deal.

Justine, for her part, loved everything about the Renaissance period, and if there were a time machine, she'd be first in line to go back. Before the IBS stuff, she'd fenced two or three times a week, but that had become problematic when the unpredictable bouts of diarrhea started, so now, she focused on the clothes. She'd spent many a night embroidering a sleeve or engineering some unique but anachronistically correct fastener. And as with all art, her handiwork was only really valid if it had an audience. So, the annual Ren Faire was an event not to be missed.

She'd ignored the gastric distress signals as she buckled her sword on that evening. *Why didn't I take anything for it?* she wondered. She flipped up the plastic cover over the toilet roll, and *THERE WASN'T ANY PAPER! Oh, God!* What was she supposed to do in this nasty, horrible little plastic bathroom with no running water? There was a tiny sink outside the cubicle with a foot pump to allow minimal handwashing, but to actually clean her behind, she'd have to waddle out there with her pants around her knees and wash herself for all to see with water that couldn't possibly be sanitary. *This has to be some sort of health violation*, she thought. Shouldn't there be a minimal amount of toilet paper required per person at an event? She guessed that this bank of potties had seen a disproportionate amount of traffic.

Squatting above the seat so as not to touch it, she rummaged clumsily in the historically accurate draw-string purse that hung from her belt. She held her pants, sword clattering awkwardly, with one hand attempting to keep them out of the puddle on the floor as her one and only lipstick splashed into it. "Shit," she said. It had been the perfect shade to enhance her full lips without looking unnatural. She was relieved, finally, to discover a crumpled grocery receipt with which she did her best to clean her backside. Up to that point she was coping. It was when she stood to pull her pants up that the real disaster struck.

Her brand-new phone flipped out of her pocket into the fetid blue water of the porta potty.

The people in line outside the porta potties thought maybe a crime had been committed when they heard the howl from behind the men's door. That is, until Justine emerged, wild-eyed, and wailed, "I've dropped my phone in the blue water!"

The first guy in line was obviously meant to be some sort of merchant with a long gray beard, brown breeches and hose and an embroidered brown waistcoat over a puffy-sleeved shirt—also brown. Peasant but not. The handwork was too fine. A gold ring sparkled in one ear. "M-huh-lady," he spluttered and guffawed, bowing.

Justine scowled at the man and said, "It's not funny! My phone is in the porta potty!"

"Ah, love. I think you'll be needing a new phone."

The guy behind him pushed past and into the open door muttering, "Some of us still have to take a leak."

Justine whipped around as the door snicked closed. "No! Don't pee on my phone!"

At that, the brown man, well in his cups, doubled over. He was holding himself now so he wouldn't wet his pants. "You-hou-hou are killing me-he-he-he! *Don't pee on her phone!*"

Justine went down the three steps to ground level where her boot crunched in the gravel that lined the entire tent complex. She looked around for an attendant or anyone else who worked there. She wondered how long it would take the nasty blue chemicals to entirely consume her phone. She couldn't afford a new one. *Can it even be repaired if they get it out of there?* she wondered. Nirvana's "Smells like Teen Spirit" whined from speakers on the tentpoles. A steady stream of revelers flowed through the tents stopping at buffet tables along the way and taking turns blocking the flow of the gravel-crunching crowd periodically as conversations sprung up in the middle of the path. Pulsating purple, blue, and pink strobe lights made it hard to recognize the waiters, especially with everyone in Renaissance garb. People in voluminous costumes were rocking out along the way, and four geometric shapes suspended from chain at the corners of the dancefloor in the twenty-foot-high main tent held scantily clad nymphs and satyrs dancing seductively.

At that moment, however, the festive air was lost on Justine as she focused on getting to somebody, anybody who could help her get her phone out of the porta potty. At length, she reached the bar, just as Kurt Cobain reached a crescendo, screaming "a denial, a denial, a denial." Justine spotted a wench with breasts bulging out of her loosely cinched blouse, recognizable as staff only by the drink tray she held. Justine pressed as close as she was able and yelled into the woman's

ear, "My phone fell in the porta potty." Of course, that's right when the song finished and everybody around her heard. One guy spit his drink on his date as he burst out laughing.

The waitress turned to the bartender. "Ruthie! Clean up in the porta-potties." She turned back to Justine. "There's a guy with a swimming pool net somewhere around here." She chuckled. "Sorry."

Justine stood there, unclear what to do next. She waited for the guy with the net and thought, *One drink and a puff on the Hookah pipe is all I'm going to get out of this very expensive party.* She'd been so happy for a chance to show off her beautiful cloak, and she wasn't even wearing it. She was as embarrassed to be standing here out of costume as she was about her predicament with the phone. At least her beautiful cloak had survived the porta potty debacle. Sheila had it over at the Hookah table. Beautiful costumes swirled around her, but she could hardly take them in. A juggler with flaming red hair and a bright green tartan kilt paused by her and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively as he threw a club over his shoulder and caught it. He moved on once he'd made her smile. The bartender tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, but you're blocking my run rail. The waiters need to get up here. Where are you hanging out? We'll come find you."

"The Hookah tables," Justine said and pointed to the area at the back of an adjoining tent. She guessed that she'd better go break the news to Sheila that they'd have to leave early.

She made her way to Sheila and shouted into her cloud of hair. "I've got the runs, and there's no toilet paper here."

Sheila turned to face her and shouted, "And?"

"I have to go home."

"Pull the other one," Sheila said, but in the space of about three seconds, her eyes flashed several clear, nonverbal messages: *Do you know what I paid for these tickets?* and *We just got here and Call a fucking Uber.*

Attempting to soften the blow, Justine said, "Hang out for a little longer. I also dropped my phone in the porta potty."

Sheila blew a lungful of smoke out, coughing. "I can't take you anywhere! Look, look. Maybe they have some Imodium or something in the first aid tent. Then let's see if there is any Uber service out here. I am not fucking leaving this party yet." She scanned the area for a waiter, then, as she blew nearly perfect smoke rings, she shouted, "Can't you just hold it?"

With her eyes, Justine said *FUCK NO*. With her mouth, she said, "Where's the first aid tent?"

Sheila clearly wasn't going anywhere for the rest of the night. If things had gone to plan, Justine would have been the designated driver, but she knew Sheila would rather have the handsome knight

Kestrel

beside her take her home, though that guy was currently telling a joke to the minstrel beside him. *Poor Sheila*, Justine thought. *Your gaydar is faulty, love.*

Sheila spotted a waiter, empty drink tray held aloft. "Hey, waiter . . . where's the first aid tent?" she shouted. Sheila's voice wasn't her best feature, and it came out sounding like a fishwife. The guy pointed, and Justine stood to head in that direction. Sheila yelled, "Take your cloak!" Then she made a telephone of her thumb and pinkie finger but giggled and shrugged when she remembered that Justine's phone was in the porta potty.

The entrance to the first aid tent was decorated with flower garlands and a sign that said, "Wise Woman in Residence." Inside, the tent looked like a school nurse's office with a paper-covered examination table, a desk, and a bored-looking woman in Cinderella scrubs filing her nails. Justine blinked in the bright white light and said, "Do you have anything for diarrhea?"

The nurse said, "I have. What seems to be the trouble?"

"It's IBS. I should have taken something before I left home."

"That's alright then. You sound sober. You haven't taken any drugs at all, have you?"

Justine shook her head *no*.

"I have to be careful what I administer to drunks. All part of the fun and games around here. I have some papers you have to sign. If you keel over, it's on you."

Next, Justine checked in with the bartender to see if her phone had been retrieved yet, but when her stomach began to gurgle, she turned toward the nearest bank of porta potties—two tents away. As she whirled around to face that direction, the same flame-haired juggler from earlier, leapt backward collecting his brightly colored balls as they fell from the air around her.

"Milady. I crave thy forgiveness." He bowed and his kilt flared around him. His long ginger hair was tied back with a strip of leather, and he was near enough that Justine could smell his aftershave.

Over the speakers, Dave Grohl belted out, "What if I say I'm not like the others . . ."

Justine gave the juggler a faint, close-lipped smile, though the flutter in her chest was insistent enough that it momentarily overshadowed her urge to poop. She reined the irrational emotion aside. She'd seen his sort before—roving court jesters employed by the Faire. Apparently, this guy had been following her—making fun of her behind her back for the general amusement of other passersby. She hadn't noticed, but the people around her had. She saw a courtier duck

his head in an attempt to hide his stomach and grimace. Justine grabbed her stomach and grimaced. "Milady! Art thee unwell?"

"I need the toilet," Justine became a security guard.

"Take my arm, lady." The man proffered his elbow. Justine allowed the flank of the crowd to the staff toilets, hi curtains.

"In here, lady." Justine slipped out of back of a convenient chair. "I registered the man's nod as where she found ample toilet water. She emerged feeling at parade rest and guarding. "My pleasure, lady asking, but are you the same earlier?"

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"Milady! Art thee unwell?" And just like that, the jester became a security guard.

"I need the toilet," Justine ground out.

"Take my arm, lady." The man, remaining in character, proffered his elbow.

Justine allowed the flamboyant character to pull her through the crowd to the staff toilets, hidden behind the bar by a wall of curtains.

"In here, lady."

Justine slipped out of her cloak, which she slung over the back of a convenient chair. "Can I leave this with you?" She barely registered the man's nod as she hurried into one of the staff toilets where she found ample toilet paper and a proper sink with running water. She emerged feeling much better and found the juggler standing at parade rest and guarding her cloak. "Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure, lady." He dropped the accent. "Pardon me asking, but are you the same lady who dropped her phone in the bog earlier?"

"Oh, yes!"

He pulled a small radio from his sporran, "Brian, I've found the lady who lost her phone. We're by the staff toilets." A garbled response followed, and ginger-man said to Justine, "He'll be along shortly. You know the phone is probably dead."

"Yes, but I need the corpse of the thing to take back to the place I bought it. I've only had it a week."

"Isn't that just the way. I'm Gerald."

"Justine."

A giant in simulated bear hide sauntered up and produced a Ziplock from some mystery pocket. Even in the oddly shifting colored light, Justine could see that the phone inside the bag was covered in unnaturally blue syrupy liquid. She reached out and pinched the bag between thumb and index finger. "Ewww, thanks," she said.

The giant smiled and shrugged. "Happens all the time."

"Are you the cellphone retriever, then?"

"Brian the giant, lady." He made little air quotes with his fingers when he said, "the giant."

"Justine. And really, I'm so embarrassed to put you to that trouble." She made to rummage in her purse for a tip.

Brian shook his head and indicated that he wanted no tip. His radio made a noise, from one of those secret pockets of his, and he rummaged around, eventually producing the device and turning aside to respond.

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Overhead, Sublime sang about Santeria, and the nymphs and satyrs on their metal frames stretched into bizarre, contorted poses. When Brian turned back, he took Justine's hand and said, "Lady, I must away. I pledge you my service. If ever you need me, you have but to ask." He kissed her hand and disappeared in three long strides.

Justine faced Gerald and offered him a little smile. "And thank you, Gerald."

"May I call someone for you? Your date?"

"Oh. Yes! I need a taxi or an Uber. My friend drove, but she isn't ready to leave."

"That'll be difficult. They don't come all the way out here. But the good news is that if you can wait half an hour, I'll do my act, and my shift will finish. I'd be happy to drive you. Wait back here if you like."

She thought about protesting, but she didn't since she saw no other way to get home. She said, "No, I'd like to see your act."

"Wonderful!" Gerald clapped his hands. "You can help!" And just like that he leapt back into character. He grabbed Justine's hand and set off toward the main stage at a trot. As they approached the crowd around the stage, he said, "Make your way to about the third row back on the left side." He pointed.

Justine gulped.

"Your pardon, lady." He bowed and trotted off into the crowd leaving her to make her way into position.

The show was part juggling, part fire-eating, and part sleight-of-hand magic. About halfway through, Gerald pulled Justine from the audience "at random." She elbowed her way up to the stage where she stood like a deer in the headlights, but Gerald was a pro and gave clear, if humorous directions that required little thought from Justine. She was as surprised as everyone else when the white bunny appeared from the hood of her cloak. While there was a collective "Awwww" from the audience at the rabbit's appearance, the real laugh came as Gerald grimaced and turned the cloak's voluminous hood inside-out dumping a handful of what appeared to be rabbit pellets on the floor. The audience was delighted.

Justine thought back to Gerald guarding her cloak. *The sly devil!*

Gerald winked at her.

Justine grinned, enjoying the laughter of the audience. All was well until Justine tripped on her cloak which caused Gerald to blow fire onto a barbarian in bear hide on the edge of the crowd. Justine held her hand to her eyes and recognized Brian the giant as he roared and charged the stage with a battle ax raised menacingly.

Gerald shouted, could duck behind as he barely outpacing the giant. instinct took over, and circular move to disarm gym. The crowd went then raised her arms the show.

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Gerald shouted, "Hide, lady!" and pointed to a large chest she could duck behind as he ran from one side of the stage to the other, barely outpacing the giant. As they drew near Justine's hiding place, instinct took over, and she leapt out with her sword performing a circular move to disarm the giant as she'd done a million times in the gym. The crowd went wild, and both Brian and Gerald bowed to her, then raised her arms high so she could take a bow with them and close the show.

When the lights went down, the two men laughed and clapped her on the back.

"What was that?" Brian asked.

"You are full of surprises, lady," Gerald said.

"I'm so sorry about tripping and making Gerald blow fire at you, Brian. Are you alright?"

"It was all part of the act, lady," Brian said.

"I tripped you," added Gerald.

"You should apply for a job. We could use you in the act," Brian said.

Justine thought for barely a heartbeat. "Do they offer health insurance?"

