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The Men's Guide to the Women's Bathroom

Jo Barrett

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Extract

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The greatest advice I ever heard was in the women's bathroom. Sure, I was in Mexico. And sure, I'd had a few tequila shooters too many. But still, it sounded like Confucius at the time.

I'd rushed into a stall clutching a handful of cocktail napkins for several reasons:

Number one: it was Mexico and I knew there wouldn't be any toilet paper.

Number two: I knew this because finding an unsoiled roll of Charmin in a Mexican nightclub is like diving for oyster pearls.

Number three: I was nursing a fantastic nosebleed. The type of nosebleed people would pay money to see.

Yep. Mine was not a supermodel nosebleed. A fashionably slim trickle of blood brought on by a night of cocaine-fueled, Kate Moss-style partying. Mine was a veritable gusher, an ink spray of red against cocktail black. Brought on by the not-so-sexy-and-certainly-unwelcome presence of a sinus infection – a detail I never

anticipated when signing up for my 'Cancun Scuba Diving Adventure for Newly Divorced Singles'.

The infection kept me from participating in the evening dive. So, while everyone else waved to me from the boat, I decided to dock myself on the nearest barstool. Next to the dive shop was one of those Mexican beach bars. At the time, a neon green frog smiling down at me from the billboard advertising Senior Swanky's seemed a godsend.

I struggled out of my rubber wet suit and pulled on a slinky dress – the one I'd paid an arm and a leg for and that the saleslady had called 'obsidian' instead of black. I know it seems odd wearing a black cocktail dress to a Mexican Cantina, but hey. You never know when you're going to run into Benicio del Toro, right?

Buzzing out of the dive shop, I walk across the sand to Senor Swanky's and sidle up to the bar.

What happened next started everything . . .



The bartender shoves a basket of chips and salsa in front of me. '*Cerveza*?,' he asks, grinning at me in my flirty black dress. He sees me looking at his nametag, which reads DONKEY HOTIE in big letters.

'My mother name me after famous Spanish writer,' he says pointing at the nametag. 'Don QEE-xote.'

'Book,' I correct him, squeezing onto a wooden barstool.

'*Que*?'

'Don Quixote is the title of the book, not the writer,' I say.

He shrugs. 'Book, writer, same theeng.' He pours pink liquor into a cocktail shaker and begins shaking furiously. His entire body jiggles as he shakes.

'You ever have prickly pear margar-EETA?' he asks, his tongue clicking against the gap between his front teeth.

I shake my head no.

'From the cactus?'

I shake my head no again.

'You try,' he says, shoving a pink, frothy glassful of stuff under my nose.

I take a sip, gingerly, and let the sweet slush glide down my throat.

'Delicious,' I say, smacking my lips, and he seems pleased. I pluck a cocktail napkin off the bar and blow my nose. Hard. Nothing comes out but a honking noise.

'You seeck?'

I nod.

'Too bad, lady. Where you from?'

'Austin.'

He claps his hands once. 'Ah! Bueno! The Mu-zeek City,' he says, swinging his hips side to side and doing a little salsa shuffle behind the bar.

'Donkey love thee mu-ZEEC!' he shouts.

He pulls a compact disc from his pocket and slaps it down in front of me. 'I burn theez yesterday,' he says, puffing out his chest.

I stare down at the handwritten label. It reads 'Donkey Hotie's Beach Music Jam.'

He snaps his fingers. 'Since ess jess you an' Donkey, le'ss play some beach music, jes?'

I glance around the bar and realize that he's right. I'm the only customer.

Hmm. Where is Benicio del Toro?

I wave the CD in the air. 'Put it on,' I say, and this ends up being an even bigger mistake than the underwater camera I'd specially purchased.

An hour later, after wasting away again in Margaritaville and having Jose Cuervo become an even better friend of mine, I've had enough. Donkey's beach mix has a total of four songs on it. As much as I love to sing along with 'Brown-Eyed Girl,' I find myself gritting

my teeth on the ninth go-around. Each time the CD ends, Donkey punches the Play button on his tinny boom box and starts it all over.

'Eez great music. The BEST!' he says, clapping his hands and swishing side to side, cha, cha, cha.

I'm not a violent person, but I suddenly wish Bob Marley had simply shot the damn deputy.

I'm rescued, finally, by the arrival of my Newly Divorced Scuba Diving Group. The boat wobbles into the slip, and I watch, envious, as they rush to the bar, their eyes glistening from exhilaration. I hastily wipe my nose and ball up the snotty napkin in my hand. The divers crowd around, regaling me with stories of all I've missed. Something about a giant striped eel and a grouper the size of a Volkswagen Jetta. Apparently, this is the first scuba trip in Mexican history where even Shamu showed up.

I'm beginning to regret my decision. Regret that I've joined a group of complete strangers for a Scuba Diving Adventure in a foreign country. Regret that I left the window to my cabana open last night and caught an infection instead of a sea breeze.

I dunk a tortilla chip into the salsa and shove it in my mouth.

Great, my sinuses are stopped up to the point where salsa tastes like clumpy water.

How could things be worse? I think. And that's when I feel the warm blood spurt from my nose.

'Oh wow!' Donkey says. He shoves a wad of cocktail napkins in my hand and points frantically to the bathroom. From the look on his face, I assume my bloody nose is a showstopper.

I rush through the bar and plunge into a stall. Blood

streaks across the toilet, the white tile floor. Zip, zip.

I'm Jackson Pollock, my brush whipping across canvas.

Don't cry, I tell myself as the blood squirts against my hand. And then I say it again aloud, just to make sure I heard myself.

'DO. NOT. CRY. CLAIRE.'

But it seems I have so much to cry about. I'm Divorced. I'm stuck in Cancun with a raging sinus infection. And it's my birthday.

This was my mother's idea, of course.

'Learning a new skill will take your mind off things,' she'd clucked. She'd suggested cooking classes. I'd chosen, instead, to don a mask and flippers and waddle into the 34th Street YMCA swimming pool in the dead of winter. But I digress . . .

Just as I'm debating whether to cry or fly back to Austin to kill my mother, the bathroom door bangs open.

I peek through the crack in the stall. Two women from my trip are standing in front of the mirror. They're identical twins from Dallas, and both their names end in *i*. Jenni and Lauri, I think. They're both divorced, both single moms, and both on the prowl. Unlike me in my ridiculous black dress, they're sporting tight jeans and chunky jewelry.

They have bleached blonde hair, fake breasts, and orange spray-on tans, and I like them, tremendously.

I stumble from the stall and glance from one twin to the other. Jenni is wearing a nameplate necklace, thank God. It says ***Jenni*** in fancy cursive and dangles seductively between her cleavage.

'Ohmigaaa! What happened to you?' she squeals. I

step to the mirror and press the bloodied napkin to my nose.

'Sinus infection,' I reply in a shaky voice. They both nod quietly, as if this is some alien affliction. I imagine that Jenni and Lauri always look perfect and suffer from nothing more than mere migraines brought on by the cancellation of *American Idol* or by Neiman Marcus closing early on Sundays.

'Are you gonna bleed to death, hon?' Lauri asks. Because, apparently, she's the sister with all the brio.

I pinch my nose and hold my head back. 'I w'ink it'll stop on it's w'own,' I sputter.

Jenni does a cute little shiver, and her necklace toggles between her breasts. 'Good grief, sweetie! Bummer of a trip for you,' she says. She leans toward the mirror, puckers her lips and rolls a bright red lipstick around them.

'How do I look, ladies?' she asks, mashing her lips together.

'Lean forward,' Lauri says. She plucks a tissue from her fake crocodile purse and pushes it toward her sister's lips. 'Blot,' she orders.

Jenni raises a waxed eyebrow. 'You think it's too red?' she asks, glancing at me for help.

'I – I think you wook fine,' I manage to say, with my nose still pinched.

Lauri slaps her hands to her hips. It's too bright,' she announces. 'It looks like you're trying too hard.' She raises a long, tanned arm and points to the bathroom door. 'If you wanna impress those guys out there, you better listen up . . .' She takes a deep breath. 'I'm only gonna say this once, Jenni – Men don't *marry* eager.'

She swings around and huffs out of the bathroom.

Jenni shrugs her thin shoulders. 'She's right, you know,' she says, blotting the lipstick with Kleenex. 'You never want men to know just how badly you want them.'

'I wike your wipstick,' I say, because now I'm officially retarded.

'Thanks. These lipsticks have the cutest names. Like this one. It's called Jamaican Me Crazy.'

She shows me the bottom of the tube.

I nod. 'Well, you wook great. Happy hunting.'

Jenni giggles and pops her sugar-free gum. 'Is it obvious I'm desperate?'

'It's a Singles Suba Trip.'

'Minor detail,' she says. She flips the lipstick in the trash and sashays out of the bathroom.

I pluck the lipstick off a heap of paper towels, unroll the tube and scrawl in Jamaican Me Crazy chicken scratch across a bloodied cocktail napkin *Men Don't Marry Eager*. Then, I fold the napkin, delicately, so as not to smear it, and shove it in my purse.