

Out of Order

Apartment 203 was quaint and well-kept, with pictures whose frames still held stock images of artificially happy families decorating the walls and knick knacks whose ages exceeded that of the building itself perched atop each piece of furniture. In other words, it reminded Elise more of a lonely old lady's apartment and less of one in which the previous owner had died.

Perhaps "died" was a bit of a stretch. Okay, so it was more of a gargantuan stretch, like the kind of stretch one takes when stopping for Funyuns and gas partway through a twelve-hour road trip. Really, no one knew for certain what had happened to 203's previous owner, Cynthia Mutton. The superintendent, a middle-aged Turkish man named Mr. Tuvalet, whose heavy footsteps had nearly sent a tacky porcelain cow tumbling from the mantle, claimed the apartment was the scene of a crime because technically, it was. The crime itself wasn't a homicide but a disappearance, the specifics of which had eluded a myriad of true crime YouTubers, many of which Elise watched like some people watched the dreadfully bleak morning news or painfully unfunny late-night comedians. In fact, it was by watching these videos that she was looking to purchase the apartment in the first place.

That, and her boyfriend of three years, eleven months, and twenty-eight days had dumped her last month, leaving her with double the rent, their pet Axolotl, Kirby, and a whole lot of heartache.

Fortunately for Elise (and Mr. Tuvalet), Cynthia's apartment came questionably cheap. This was equal parts due to the previous owner having presumably gone missing in it, as well as it being situated smack dab in the middle of a particularly rough neighborhood. Elise was beginning to suspect that the various used syringes she'd found scattered outside Shady Oaks Apartments were somehow behind the disappearance of Cynthia Mutton, even though she'd apparently never smoked, much less experimented with drugs.

Presently, Elise was sitting in front of Mr. Tuvalet, pretending to sip at the shitty instant coffee he'd hastily prepared before their meeting. If Elise was being honest with herself, and she often was, their meeting wasn't even necessary, as Elise would've bought the apartment even if the superintendent had said it was home to a family of rabid possums. Really, she wanted to obtain an authentic, firsthand account on the events leading up to Cynthia's disappearance. And what was more authentic than the words of a man who'd been living in the same building as her for years?

In her best "Clueless Woman" voice, she asked, "Can you tell me what happened to the previous owner?" She even inspected her fingers to achieve the desired effect.

Mr. Tuvalet looked up from his coffee, his eyes as wide as a Japanese Chin's. "I was under the impression you already knew."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's all everyone ever talks about, both 'round these parts and on the Internet. Oh, hell. Maybe 'yer last place was a rock."

He laughed. Elise didn't.

Mr. Tuvalet cleared his throat. “Er, anyway, you’re the first person to come in here who didn’t shove a microphone or iPhone in my face, so the least I can do is entertain ‘ya. Cynthia, she was a sweet girl. Had social anxiety something fierce, though, and it ended up getting so bad that one day she up and locked herself in the bathroom right there...

“But before that, a little backstory. To put it simply, Cynthia Mutton had never felt more at home than when she was in a bathroom. Whether it was a filthy gas station stall, a claustrophobia-inducing porta-potty, or her own porcelain shitter, as long as there was a toilet of some kind, well, Cynthia was as content as a nerd at Comic Con.

“There was no Freudian explanation as to why she was so fond of restrooms. Cynthia was never abused physically or psychologically, was never fondled by a family member or forced to watch a loved one die violently before her eyes. Nor was she ever afflicted with Crohn’s disease, IBS, or any other embarrassing disease that ensured she’d always have to be within jogging distance from a restroom. When it became obvious that Cynthia was, uh, *different* from most children her age, the Muttons had spent an absurd amount of money on child psychiatrists. Though these psychiatrists varied in credentials and pay, they’d all come to the same conclusion, the conclusion being that Cynthia just really liked bathrooms, and that there was nothing the psychiatrists or parents could do.

“If you wanna get technical about it, her affinity with bathrooms started in middle school. If you wanna get even more technical about it, her restroom obsession began in seventh grade, a.k.a. what’s easily the shittiest year out of three already pretty shitty years. Where you and I might associate middle school bathrooms with tissue paper-thin toilet paper and beige walls engraved with graffitied penises, Cynthia associated them with feelings of serenity and comfort. For her, the bathroom was an

escape from the hormonal hell that was middle school. Essentially friendless, she would eat her lunch in the bathroom, and, while she was remarkably never bullied until that point, it wasn't long before she was given the nickname 'Toilet Girl.'

"One would think that by earning this nickname, Cynthia would be subjected to various forms of bullying, most of them bathroom-related. And they wouldn't be half wrong: Cynthia regularly had her locker filled with feces and the occasional urine-filled water bottle slipped into her Justice backpack, but she was never forced to drink dirty toilet water, or gotten one of them swirlies. Do kids still call them that anymore? Hell, do kids still *do* them anymore? Anyway, that isn't to say there weren't attempts; Cynthia went to an American high school in an era where cyber bullying was still in its infancy. Of course there were attempts. More specifically, there was *an* attempt, and a short-lived one at that.

"Speaking of swirlies, one day Trent Matthews, who was easily the cruelest little shit Ursula K. Le Guin middle school had to offer and who had slid his share of Ziploc baggies filled with dog crap into the slits of Cynthia's locker, thought it would be funny as hell if he stuffed her hair into the toilet hole and flushed. As the girl walked past him on her way to pre-algebra, he grabbed a firm fistful of her black hair. Cynthia made no attempt to free herself: she didn't stomp on Trent's foot, spit in his face, or even call for help. She simply stood there, like one of them plastic owls rich people put by their pools to keep birds and the like from shitting in them. Weird, right?

"But wait," Mr. Tuvalet said in a booming voice that startled Elise, "it gets weirder. The boy's restroom consisted of four urinals and one proper stall, which was, of course, occupied. Trent, being in the middle of his 'girls have cooties' phase us guys go through at that age, wasn't about to enter the

ladies' bathroom, so, in lieu of knocking, he slammed Cynthia against the stall door. A scrawny eighth-grader Joseph had never tormented—even bullies don't fuck with eighth-graders—scrambled out of the stall, a strip of toilet paper comically glued to the bottom of his knockoff Vans. Trent dragged a still-passive Cynthia into the empty stall and locked the door. The poor eighth-grader hadn't had time to flush which, naturally, made Trent's job much easier.”

Elise felt her stomach roil at the implication. “Don't tell me...”

Mr. Tuvalet raised a massive tan hand. “Wait, I'm getting to the good part.”

Elise slumped back in her chair.

“As I was saying,” Mr. Tuvalet continued, “Trent planned to dunk Cynthia headfirst into the forbidden porridge, was practically hard at the thought of it. Only there was one small problem. The toilet was glowing.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait. *Glowing?*” Elise had believed everything Mr. Tuvalet had said thus far. A girl who only felt safe whenever she was within a bathroom? Sure, whatever, sounded reasonable enough. Stranger things had happened; for instance, in high school, she'd known a girl who was convinced she was a Godzilla *kaiju*—Anguirus, to be specific. But a glowing toilet?

“Not only that,” Said Mr. Tuvalet, “No matter how hard he tried, Trent couldn't dunk the girl's head into the water. A magnetic force, or something, was preventing him from doing so. With every inch he'd managed to push the girl forward, It sent him right back to the start, like a cursed game of Monopoly. Whatever It was, it didn't want Cynthia touching the water. But that Trent, he was a determined little shit. If there was something he wanted, he always got it, no matter what. He wasn't a

bully, he was *the* bully. He refused to let anything or anyone get in his way, even if it was a glowing toilet.

“He tried and tried, with all his pre-teen might, to push Cynthia forward, but he could hardly move her by a centimeter. All the while, Cynthia remained quiet, indifferent to the whole thing, and this, naturally, infuriated Trent even more. Finally, after shouting a few choice words, I’m sure, the boy shoved Cynthia forward with all his remaining strength, which at that point probably wasn’t very much. The toilet vomited its contents all over Trent, missing Cynthia entirely, even though she was closer to the hole than the boy was. The shithead fled from the bathroom dripping with the eighth grader’s bodily fluids, and probably other students’. Sure as hell smelled like it, too. Probably. Anyway, he shouted at anyone in the hallway who laughed or crinkled their nose at him, which was essentially everybody, to never fuck with Toilet Girl, and also to stop calling her that.

“This wasn’t to say her peers and teachers had finally begun to refer to her by her actual name; on the contrary, they hardly acknowledged her at all, and when they did it was either out of obligation or fear. Years later, Cynthia would come to realize that the reason Henry Fischer lent her a pencil wasn’t because he liked her but because he feared that if he didn’t, she’d summon her toilet powers and drench him in a totally different kind of number two, if you catch my drift.

“As for the toilet itself, the janitor had inspected it the following day and had found no complications with the plumbing. The toilet experienced no other issues, not even when the flusher was replaced with an automatic one several years later. Over the years, the incident would be simply referred to as The Incident. Every school has one. For instance, The Incident at my high school was when a student overheard Mrs. Kuntz, an English teacher, and Ms. Garamond, the gym teacher, going

at it in the teacher's lounge. Not much of an incident, now that I think about it, but hey, it sure had the whole school talking for a while.

“Those who were students at the time of The Incident—the one at Cynthia's school, not mine—had passed on its details to their younger siblings, who then told their friends, who told their friends, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, yada, yada, yada, you know how it goes. As is the case with these sorts of things, the details were tweaked, dramatified, and, in one such variation, sexualized, and by the time Cynthia had graduated high school, The Incident barely resembled its original, true version. But the Sparknotes version remained, and it went something like this: one day there was a girl who could control toilets with her mind. Like Carrie, minus the child abuse.

“Cynthia's bathroom ‘problem’, if you wanna call it that, persisted all throughout the remainder of her childhood and into adolescence. Whenever the Muttons had guests over, their daughter would lock herself inside their then-frog-themed bathroom and sit on the toilet until it was safe to leave. She rarely slept in her own bed anymore, opting instead to spend her nights curled up on the toilet seat like a cat. Whenever they went anywhere as a family, the Muttons had to hold their daughter's hand tightly at all times because if they loosened their grip just a little, she'd go running for the nearest public restroom like an unfortunate truck driver who'd sampled gas station sushi. It was for this reason that family vacations and the occasional trip to Target became less of a fun family bonding time and more of a game, the objective of which was to keep Cynthia away from any and all bathrooms, and which, as far as games went, wasn't very fun. Unless, of course, she actually needed to use one, in which case Mrs. Mutton would stand outside the stall and listen to the telltale sound of her daughter's piss hitting the water or her shit plopping into the water like pebbles.

“Cynthia had always been a smart girl, so it wasn’t long ‘fore she realized that just because she *said* she had to use the restroom didn’t mean she *had* to actually use it. Her mother, who’d Cynthia gotten her smartness from, was quick to catch on to this, and so she insisted that Cynthia only use the bathroom if she was on the verge of wetting or soiling herself. Furthermore, whenever they ate out, the Muttons would always request a booth so that the parents could sit on either side of their daughter like fleshy bookends, which made slipping out and escaping to the bathroom as easy as passing a kidney stone.

“Raising a daughter with a quirk as inconveniencing as this would turn any sane parents to divorce at best and foster care at worst, but the Muttons were better than that. They loved each other, and they loved Cynthia in spite of all the weird looks and whispering strangers, in spite of the thousands of dollars they’d shat out on therapists and psychiatrists. Besides, divorce would only amplify their daughter’s condition or give rise to a new one entirely, and there was no guarantee that Cynthia’s next pair of parents would be as patient as the Muttons. Even so, the Muttons had hoped that, like most childhood quirks, their daughter would outgrow her strange, often inconvenient habit. But this was different from your typical case of nail biting, bed wetting, or any other juvenile behavior that fades with time. No, this could very be, as the various psychiatrists had told the Muttons, potentially lifelong. And they’d been right.”

Mr. Tuvaleet paused to drink his now lukewarm coffee and winced. Perhaps he should’ve brewed something better. Or stronger.

“I never knew about any of this,” Elise said. Mirroring Mr. Tuvaleet, she sipped her own coffee, tilting the mug towards her so it’d be less obvious she was spitting it out.

Mr. Tuvalet sprung out of his chair and pointed a fat finger at Elise. “Ah-ha! I knew you were full of shit!”

This caused Elise to loosen her grip slightly on her mug, and coffee splattered onto her blouse. “Shit.”

The superintendent slumped back in the chair, which groaned in protest. “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna poison your drink or nothin’. There’s probably a lot more info them TwoYubers and TikTackies forgot to mention. Like how she was on the toilet so long that one day she fused with it.

Now Elise had a proper reason to spit out her coffee. Before she could say anything, however, Mr. Tuvalet went on, “As Cynthia grew older, the urge to lock herself in bathrooms became increasingly urgent. Anyone who’s ever been an adult, even if for just a brief time, should be able to understand why: with adulthood comes work, bills, responsibilities, the knowledge that the world is shit and no amount of voting or protestin’s gonna change that. In other words, with adulthood comes stress, and Cynthia and stress were well-acquainted before she was twenty-five.

“After graduating college (her college years had, of course, also been interspersed with frequent trips to the bathroom), she worked a variety of jobs, from manning an Arby’s drive-thru window to bagging groceries at the Piggly Wiggly, before finally landing a part-time gig as an editor for *Iconik Magazine*, the first job she’d had that would make the long hours she’d spent reading hundreds of pages of Shakespeare somewhat pay off. The greatest perk the job offered was the option to work remotely, a perk that was, to her, more beneficial than any lousy health insurance or 401k. After all, who wants affordable healthcare or post-retirement security when you could work from the comfort of your own home, or, in Cynthia’s case, your own bathroom?

“To say that she only did work in her bathroom was an understatement. She ate her meals there, streamed shows and movies there...hell, she even had sex there. On occasion, she would tentatively venture out of her apartment, but only to buy groceries or visit the doctor. Eventually, the pandemic hit, leaving everyone as isolated as Cynthia. As awful as the virus was, it did normalize buying groceries and seeing the doctor online, and I don't think I have to tell you just how thrilled Cynthia was by all this.

“While Cynthia had certainly been dealt a bad hand in life, having obtained an incurable obsession with bathrooms at eleven, she'd also been granted the blessing of being alive during the twenty-first century. Although perhaps ‘curse’ was a more appropriate term, because it seemed that a major historical event was happening every other week, and thanks to the speed and accessibility of the Internet, escapism was impossible, and even if one were to forgo the Internet and social media, everyone and their mother's uncle would be talking about the Crisis of the Week at work, or while waiting in line at the bank or pharmacy or Best Buy.

“Cynthia had always been the empathic type, so whenever the world was stressed, so was she, and in the early 20's, the world was about as stressed as a college student with a twenty-page paper they hadn't even written the title of that was due at 9 A.M. the next morning. Perhaps your parents told you horror stories about how it was growing up in the ‘Terrible Twenties’, as they are lovingly referred to as.”

Elise nodded without really being aware that she was. She, along with most of her friends and colleagues, were Covid Babies, or CB's for short. Unluckily for Elise and the other CB's, they'd been born into a world constantly on the brink of collapse, more so than it'd been during the 20's.

Elise realized that she envied Cynthia in more ways than one.

Mr. Tuvalet continued, “This, at least, gave her a reason to constantly remain within five yards of a restroom, as she became plagued with unpleasant stomach pains that came and went as frequently as a hooker on the 31st. Luckily, they weren’t ulcers or nothing, meaning she didn’t have to leave her safe haven and go to a hospital. But that didn’t mean they weren’t a pain in the ass. Or stomach, so to speak.

“So as to be spared by the near-constant bad news that was happening all over the world every other week, Cynthia quit social media, as well as her job, where it seemed that the only conversation topic was that week’s catastrophe. Not that she could do much work anymore anyway, on account of her stomach pains. Despite this, she’d still be bombarded by ads urging her to donate to the most recent humanitarian and/or ongoing climate crisis whenever she did her online grocery shopping. She’d eventually purchase enough groceries to last several months, maybe even years if she were to ration them. She spent the next several months cooped up in her apartment, eating canned tuna and peas and reading. One thing about books, particularly those of the fiction variety, is that they, along with probably video games and movies, are the only true forms of escapism in a world that’s hell-bent on showing you what’s going on elsewhere, even if it’s horrible. Hell, *especially* if it’s horrible. But Cynthia had never been a movie person, and she could hardly afford rent, let alone one of them fancy consoles.

“One day, however, she opened a used book to find the pages scribbled with the words ‘FREE KAZAKHSTAN’, or one of them ‘stan countries where something bad’s always happening, in no small part thanks to us. Anyway, this seemed to convince her that even books weren’t safe. Remember, she had no movies or video games; books were all she had. And without books, what else did she have?”

Elise had gotten so accustomed to listening to the superintendent's tale that it took her a moment to realize he was asking her a question. "The...toilet?"

Mr. Tuvalet made a noise that was probably meant to resemble a game show buzzer but more closely resembled a malfunctioning microwave. "Correctamundo. If there's one thing Cynthia could always count on to make her feel safe, it was toilets."

Mr. Tuvalet reached behind him to open the fridge, blasting Elise with a sudden chill that made the hairs on her arms stand up like blades of grass. He placed a plate between him and Elise, the contents of which were shrouded by several layers of tin foil. "What's that?" Elise asked, more out of a need to break the silence than of curiosity.

Rather than answer her, the landlord instead peeled away the tin foil to reveal a pile of cookies garnished generously with coconut shavings. He grabbed one from the top of the pile and waved it in Elise's face. "Cookie?"

Elise reluctantly accepted the cookie, picking off the coconut the way a picky child removes olives from a slice of pizza.

Mr. Tuvalet wiped his hands on the table. "Now where was I?"

Elise bit into the cookie to find that not only were the tops of the cookies sprinkled with coconut; it'd been baked into the dough as well. She swallowed it anyway, if only to please Mr. Tuvalet. "The...toilet?"

"Yes, that's right. One day, Cynthia came to the conclusion that the reason behind all the bad stuff in the world was because she wasn't sitting on the toilet as much as she should. One day, she told me that she'd be sitting on the toilet for the indeterminable future. Even gave me a manilla envelope

with enough money to cover rent for three years, tops. I told her to keep it because I wasn't gonna charge nobody to live on a toilet. 'Sides, I pitied the girl, if you can believe it. She did, however, allow me to hold on to her apartment key, in case something were to happen. And boy, I'm glad I did, because something happened, all right.

"About a month later I checked in on her. You know, to make sure she was eating and drinking all right. Actually, it was more to make sure her food supply hadn't run out. Remember, she had no books, no phone, no TV, no nothing. Just food. And what do you do when all you got is food? You eat.

"Well, that girl had the willpower of a monk at a strip club, because she barely put a dent in her food supply. I'm glad I checked in on her when I did, though, because what I found...well, let's just say it was weirder than a glowing shitter.

"Cynthia was glued to the toilet. Literally. She noticed she was stuck when she tried to get up to reach a packet of peanut butter crackers she couldn't quite reach. She must've been stuck for days, hell, maybe weeks. Her ass—her pants were already down; I never touched the girl, mind you, the thought never even crossed my mind—had developed a nasty sore, which curled around both sides of the seat. They looked like octopus suckers, and they'd merged with her skin to the point that the two were interchangeable. I thought it'd be slightly uncomfortable, like unpeeling the backs of your thighs from a vinyl chair on a July afternoon. But those sores had a mind of their own. But all I did was hurt the poor girl, and hurt her real bad, too. God, I don't reckon I'll ever get her screams outta my head...

"Poor girl was probably as confused as I was. I mean, whaddya do when the very thing that's comforted you your whole life suddenly turns on 'ya? First books, now the toilet...jeez, it seemed

everything was out to get her. And don't even get me started on the smell. Not only did she stink from not showering since I saw her last, the sore smelled something awful, too. Could practically see green stink lines coming from it like in them cartoons. Guess what it smelled like. Go on, guess."

Elise shook her head, not because she didn't know what Cynthia could've possibly smelled like, but because she didn't want to.

Mr. Tuvalet answered anyway, "She smelled, well, like shit. And I don't mean she smelled like the shit of a singular person. I mean she smelled like the shit and piss of everyone who'd ever shat and pissed. Almost immediately, I felt my lunch rise in my throat, but I swallowed it back because that woulda made the smell even worse. Anyway, after she'd calmed down some, she told me to get a doctor and have them carve off the sores, as if they were gyros meat. I said that that would hurt even more, and besides, we didn't know which was her skin and which were the sores, and then she yelled at me to yell at them to knock her out first, then. Though I'd admittedly overcharged her rent once or twice, she'd never yelled at me 'til then. That's how I knew this was serious, as if the skin growing around the toilet seat wasn't enough to convince me.

"I wish I could tell you that this story has a happy ending. That the doctor came with his magic box of tools, put her to sleep, and did his thing. But this ain't a Disney movie, or a sitcom episode where everything's wrapped in a neat little bow at the end. This is real life, and sometimes, real life ain't pretty.

"The long and the short of it is, when I returned with the doctor—whose job description probably hadn't mentioned 'extracting a grown, able-bodied woman from a toilet'—Cynthia was, well, she was gone."

Elise pushed her half-eaten cookie aside and stood up. “Okay, I believed the glowing toilet, the being stuck to another toilet, but now you’ve officially lost me.”

Mr. Tuvalet stood up as well, causing his mug of coffee to spill and drip onto the floor. “*That* was the final straw for ‘ya? There’s no other way to explain it: the girl just vanished!”

Elise pushed in her chair, and that was when she felt a slight tug in her bladder. Ignoring the superintendent’s pleas, she asked politely, “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Er, t-to the left of the bedroom.” Mr. Tuvalet stammered.

Elise went into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She unzipped her jeans and sat on the toilet.

While peeing, she felt a whisper of warm air tickle her bare thighs.

Must be one of those futuristic toilets, Elise thought, though other than this feature, it looked like any other toilet. Acted the part too—her peeing hadn’t triggered an automatic flusher, nor did the seat immediately clean itself after she’d finished. Not that she could stand anyway; she was stuck.

“Mr. Tuvalet,” Elise called, her heart racing, “You hadn’t done anything to the toilet since Cynthia...” She forced the word out of her: “Disappeared?”

The superintendent responded instantly, “You kidding? I wouldn’t go in there even if someone pointed a gun to my head.” Then, as if he’d half-anticipated this, he asked carefully, “Why?”

Elise slouched against the lid while outside, Mr. Tuvalet pounded on the door, threatened to call 9-1-1, the police, security, et cetera, et cetera, and further outside, beyond the confines of Shady Oaks Apartments, the world carried on as usual, which is to say it got shittier and shitter.

Elise wasn’t planning on leaving.