

The Gender-Neutral Bathroom

I share a gender-neutral bathroom with the freshman baseball team. I share a gender-neutral bathroom with a team of fifteen boys because my roommate and I are the only girls on our side of the floor and the women's bathroom is about three hundred feet away. Still, instead of going to the bathroom right next to us, the bathroom whose flushes echo through our wall, my roommate walks the three hundred feet. Her choice leaves me as the only girl who uses the gender-neutral bathroom.

On move-in day, the toilet seat is up when I enter the bathroom. It's not just that the toilet seat is up, it's that the toilet seat to the right is also up, and the toilet seat to the right of that one is also up. It is my first day of college and my true welcome parade was not the screaming orientation leaders in the hallway but the toilet seats in my gender-neutral bathroom.

My first morning I am greeted by a variety of unflushed toilets. Globes of toilet paper fill the toilet in the handicapped stall. Even with this clog, someone chose to pee on top of it. There is so much toilet paper, their pee doesn't mix with the toilet water. It makes the inside of the bowl look like a raw egg. The middle stall toilet's unflushedness comes with a stench—a violent punch of stale poop. I do not inquire further. In the last stall, toilet paper is notably absent. The toilet seat is down, and it is covered with droplets of pee. The drops refract the sunlight peeking over the stall's wall. I take pictures and exit. I can hold it.

I get to know the faint smell of urine in the showers. I get to know the pubes left on the toilet seat. I get to know the dried spit on the mirror that distorts my face. I get to know the baseball team. I meet some through awkward glances in the mirror as they exit the stall and leave, not even considering washing their hands. I meet one through silent, side-by-side face washing. As I dry my face with a paper towel, he holds out his phone to get my Snapchat. My fingers are still sticky with facewash as I type my username. They leave distinct fingerprints that he rubs his phone on the side of his shorts to get rid of. I meet another one as we exit neighboring showers together. I know the simultaneous exit was not a coincidence because his shower turned off five minutes before I was done, and he opened his curtain seconds after he heard mine move. He gives me an evil grin when he opens the bathroom door for me to exit, a gentleman. I get to know some of them through their habits. I wave back in the hallway to barefoot-bathroom guy. I see consistently-spits-his-toothpaste-directly-onto-the-faucet guy on the staircase every day. The hawks-his-phlegm-in-the-shower guy and I brush our teeth together often.

I learn how to navigate. I use the handicap shower because it smells the least like pee and has the best water pressure. I keep headphones on while brushing my teeth and don't have to make small talk. On Thursdays, I can take slow, serene showers because they have practice for four hours. I wake up early so that I am the first one to brush my teeth and wash my face after the bathroom is cleaned. But I didn't learn enough to avoid barefoot-bathroom boy making eye contact with me as he pees. Not through the crack between the stall door and the divider, but through the two feet of open air from the open stall door I think he keeps open to assert his manliness or to make me feel unwelcome or just to show that he can. My body is still tense when I get back to my dorm, lay down on my bed, and try to figure out if what just happened actually happened.

I walk down the extra three hundred feet to the women's bathroom the next morning. The sinks don't have dried spit in them. The toilet seats rest gracefully on the toilet. The toilets are all

flushed because it is not an option not to flush. The silence, an absence of dirty conversations and maniacal laughter at attempts to break the soap dispenser, weighs the air down. I am upset because I know that the girls in the bathroom with me would make much funnier dirty jokes and we would be able to break the soap dispenser way more efficiently. In witnessing daily displays of grossness from my male peers, I have realized that I envy them more than I could ever hate them. I want to be gross so badly—to pee with the stall door open, to fart loudly and pungently, to leave my pee unflushed just to tell my hall-mates, “yeah, I did that.”

I spend the next week in the women’s bathroom. The cleanliness suffocates me tighter than the smell of unflushed poop. I shudder when I see a girl wipe down the sink after she uses it. It is weird finding a clean toilet on the first stall door I open. This time, when I’m done peeing, I give flushing the toilet a second thought. What if I just didn’t? The metal handle beckons me. I stand above the toilet. I want to leave. I want to shut the door behind me and make it someone else’s problem. I can’t. I cede to the gleaming metal handle. The force of my flush becomes a powerful tornado trapping me in the middle stall. I grasp at the sides of the stall but fail to gain a firm grip. Even though I am furiously running my feet backward, my slippers are too slippery and they slide me toward the toilet. I wish I was barefoot so that I could dig my toes into the grout and escape. The swirling wind whips my head and twists my hair. I try to fight against the wind. I try to fight against the cleanliness of the toilet, its sparkle and violent spotlessness. I try to fight against how my mom trained me to be neat and clean for others, especially men. But you can’t fight against a force that hits you from all angles. All I can do is run my feet backward to slow my advancement toward the eye of the wind vortex. I reach the toilet and look inside the bowl. I see the perpetual politeness expected of me that wants to swallow me whole. I see the indifference of the baseball boys who have never been expected to be anything close to polite, who don’t get trapped in the wind vortex because they don’t even flush. I leave the stall defeated. I stare at the water gushing from the faucet—I couldn’t even leave without washing my hands.

On the walk back, I read the name tags on the doors I pass. They are all girls’ names, an unwelcome reminder of my bad dorm luck. I fix my eyes on the carpet. With the motion of my stride, the hack eighties design turns almost psychedelic, the random shapes of blue and orange dance and spin. This is enough to entertain me. It is not enough to make me forget how unnecessary this walk is, how stupid it is, and how it isn’t even adding to my step totals for the day because I left my Apple watch charging in my dorm.

I have a conversation with the barefoot-bathroom boy. He tells me that whenever he saw me in his bathroom, he got uncomfortable. This stuns me. Did he think about how I could have been made uncomfortable when he started peeing with the stall door open directly in front of me? Did any of them think of how I might have felt uncomfortable in what is supposed to be *my* bathroom?

I want to go back to the bathroom out of spite, use my presence to make the baseball guys as uncomfortable as they have made me. I can wait outside their showers for them to finish, start conversations only when I know they don’t want to talk, and pee with the stall door open. But I won’t, because I know that I can make them squeamish by simply washing my face and going to the bathroom. I want to teach them a lesson, but I want to learn as well. The bathroom offers daily lessons in how to walk away from an unflushed toilet, how to expose your toes to the cold tile, and how to undo years of mom’s training. So, I return to the filth. I return to my bathroom.