

You Use This Washroom Often? By Kevin Leung

I'm sitting on my throne, going through the motions. From my perch on the toilet in the back room, I have a good look at this washroom, and it seems nice. The room is decently sized, the floor tiles aren't laminate, and the wallpaper reminds me of a fancy hotel with its dark tones and swirling, abstract pattern, though I know I'm in a single washroom in Ricker Dining. The toilet seat is split, a characteristic of commercial, public toilets that I have never understood. Glancing around a few more times, I realize how much the space is bothering me: I could do a cartwheel in here.

Why is room this so big? Prove me wrong, but no one needs much space while on the can. I'm not going anywhere. Without a newspaper, all I can do is look at the wide-open spaces, an expanse that makes me feel small and uncomfortable. Maybe washroom stalls aren't ideal, but I want to be sequestered into a confined, private area.

I'm waiting for my body to do its business, and frankly, I'm bored. Having taken in all the vistas from my vantage point, I'm getting restless, though I don't want to move. One of my old trumpet teachers told me to practice in the washroom because tile floors and mirrors resonate and reflect the sound. Although I don't have a trumpet, I do have my voice, and I start singing "The Longest Time." I get through the intro and stop because it's not working out. Instead of resonating, the sound just comes back at me, hollow and slightly depressing. This room resonates too well and sends back my actual voice, not the embellished, accented version I sometimes imagine. There's a reason why I joined band, not choir.

I guess I'll just have to stick to the traditional sounds of the washroom and wonder why I thought this journey would be exciting.

When it comes to pooping, there's only one place for me: in my dorm, on my floor, in the men's room, in the inside stall. When I look at my schedule each day, I consider when I need to go so I can get back to my one and only toilet. With so many to choose from across campus, though, it seems narrow-minded to just use one. Each washroom serves basically the same purpose, and yet, each has its own landscape, its own customs. In the 4th stall of the 3rd floor of that building, John Black, psych grad student, will be there, Chronicle in hand from 8:54 AM to 9:03 AM, and you better not take his stall. This wall has venerated etchings from the 70s, and the first stall in the hall over there doesn't lock properly. I know I feel at home in only one place at any time, but I don't think I can understand why without knowing how others experienced their excretory events. I need to leave the comfort of the 3rd floor Robinson men's room and trek through the treacherous world around me. So, I venture out into the wild to see the sights, meet the natives, and mark the land.

My safari begins in the basement of the Math Building. I have explored this site once or twice before, though not with any regularity. I step in and see that the door of the larger, handicap stall is closed. I hunch over to look under the stall and see tennis shoes and jeans around the ankles. Although I haven't quite mastered following tracks or scents yet, serendipity has guided me to man in his natural habitat.

I sit down in the other stall, pulling the Stanford Daily out of my backpack. The front page of the Monday is the usual: a heroic picture from Saturday's football game. I have some personal work to do before observing and understanding the native. Shortly after, my first interview begins.

"Hey, how's it going?" There's silence. I knock on the brushed chrome wall between us.

"Alright." The voice is confident, even, unrevealing.

"You use this washroom often?" The pause is just as long as the last, though I don't knock again. I can't see him, but I sense apprehension.

"Now and then." Not on his usual territory. I wait a moment for him to say more, though he doesn't speak.

"Well, do you have a preferred washroom?" The silence lingers. Admittedly, silence isn't the worst sound one hears in a men's room.

"Not really." Looks like we have a drifter, one who isn't as picky as I am. I hear the rattle of a spinning toilet paper dispenser, the flush, the belt buckle clatter, the opened latch, the footsteps. Looks my target has gotten away. He seemed skittish, though maybe I came on too strongly. The toilet isn't enough of a trap. I'll need to be more tactful next time.

I have lived in the United States for just over half of my life now, and those formative years in Texas swept away most of my Canadian traits. I haven't seen much snow in years, I understand more about the US Congress than the Canadian Parliament, and I don't watch hockey. My Canadian "accent" comes out from time to time, though, when someone can't tell that I'm asking for a "bag" or when I use the occasional, cliché "eh." More often, people are confused when I tell them that I need to go to the washroom. I'm not going to the bathroom, water closet, or restroom. I'm going to the washroom.

Washroom makes more sense to me. I'm going to pee, not to take a bath. I'm going to brush my teeth, not rest. I am, however, going to wash my hands, as I hope all of you do as well.

The euphemisms for washrooms and washroom-related activities have always interested me. Once, coming back from 4th grade recess, my teacher told us, "If anyone needs to use the facilities, you may do that now." "Facilities" seems far away from the true purpose of the room but is the natural progression. We develop ladders of words for culturally delicate topics. We replaced the once appropriate "retarded" with "mentally-handicapped." In time, that word will develop all of the same negative connotations as "retarded" and will also be replaced. This progression seems silly to me; the washroom is really just a shit stop, but frankly, I don't see that being written on any signs in the near future.

After that easy sighting at the Math Building, I have high hopes for the 1st floor Gates Computer Science Building men's room before dinner this evening. Judging by the male-to-female ratio in Computer Science and the typical grad student schedule, I imagine that I'll hit one of the most frequented locations around.

I arrive to a quiet washroom. The bright fluorescent lights remind me that most hackers haven't seen natural light for days, and the one odd paper towel on the floor and splatter of water around the sink counter indicate that someone had been here. Walking past the urinals, I look at the stall doors: all open. The first stall isn't properly flushed. The second one has something leftover on the seat, and same for the third. Instead of finding the locals, I find their remains. Well, one can't always be so lucky. Sometimes you have to wait in the brush for an unsuspecting target to come by. I consider my options, go back to the first stall, deftly kick the handle, then begin.

I finish up quickly, but I can't be done. I might have walked in their footsteps, but I haven't met anyone who calls this place home. Where is everyone? Something needs to happen

to make my trip worthwhile. Daily in hand, I can wait. I read through the sports articles first, then flip over to the classifieds. I read the rest of the front page article and even skim the op-eds I don't like. I fold out the crease, looking for something fresh. The other newspaper in my backpack might give me something to do until someone appears, but with my primary task done, I feel trapped, not patient.

Where is everyone? Looking at my watch, only a few minutes have passed, but waiting isn't paying off. Only the rattling of the fan interrupts the silence, and it taunts me like the wind whistling through an empty grove. This washroom isn't a good camping spot. I'll have to set up base somewhere else. I pack up and leave, empty-handed, a little down, but very relieved to move on.

I'm not picky about chairs, but I am picky about toilets, and some details matter a lot, like seat heights. I need my feet flat on the floor, but not too low. Different people are different heights, and no one can be blamed for imperfect seat height, but it's still annoying.

Low seats make me think I'm crouching over a hole in the ground. That's no way to live. And I can never judge when a seat will be too low. I turn to sit, slowly controlling the descent of my butt. Soon, I pass my comfort angle, and anxiety sets in. My knees carefully bend inwards, each degree making me more and more worried that I won't find the seat, that I'll tumble straight into the bowl. Relief when I finally get to a (hopefully) cold seat is quickly overcome, however, by dissatisfaction.

High seats can be just as bad. Sometimes, getting it done can be hard work, requiring focus of both mind and body. This focus, in turn, requires complete stability of both mind and body. When my feet are dangling, I have no stability. I'm helpless. Tippy toes are worse for the

false sense of security. The ground is a comfort until you need the extra focus, and when you go for it, your toes are no longer there. You're suddenly only supported by the only part of your body that is doing any work. Not good times.

I arrive at Green Library in the morning, business as usual. I was running out of interesting leads, but a friend mentioned that I could probably find some writings on what I was looking for at the library. I swipe my card, walk through the turnstile, and immediately head downstairs. Libraries scare off half-hearted scholars in the most ingenious ways: all of the best work is stashed away in rickety spires and dark basements, shelves and shelves converging to a vanishing point. I steel myself for the worst and head down into the thick underbrush of the South Stacks. I have been down here once before for a previous research project. I remember the darkness, lights turning on as I walk past, and only found the books I needed through a treacherous maze. This time, my fears are lessened by another student who had already lighted the way by his presence. My current path is well trodden and doesn't require a database book search to find the shelf; it's behind a door labeled "MEN."

And there it is. I find the writings on what I was looking for: toilet stalls. I don't have any business to do, but I set my backpack down, walk into the inside stall, and sit down, pants still on. All around me, the words and pictures tell me what washroom culture is all about: a disposable seat cover labeled "FREE COWBOY HATS" and a declaration "Reed College #1, bitches!" Many someones at sometime cared what was happening in here. The graffiti isn't boredom with a pencil while defecating; the writings extend to corners farther than where one can reach while sitting. I sketch copies of the wall into my spiral notebook. There's a fish, a

teardrop, a giant penis, and oddly enough, in different pens, several notes express interest in coming by late at night and meeting someone named "BJ." Weird.

After finishing my sketches, I take one last look, and realize what I need to do. I reach into my backpack and pull out the dry erase marker I had packed this morning. Having never partaken in graffiti before, I am somewhat reluctant, but there's no way to defile a boys' washroom with just a marker. The artists might have fled this territory years ago, but as long as someone can find, appreciate, and add to their art, their culture will live on.

Dropping a deuce is a very private moment. When you're in there, you have a single task and want to be left alone. Other than a few idiots interviewing you while on the can, most people don't want to bother you, either. It's the same mutual respect that generally prevents traffic accidents and public nudity: no one wants to do it or see it happen. I think washroom rituals developed because we don't want to make any mistakes. We chat while brushing our teeth, washing our hands, and even using the urinals. When you walk into a stall, though, you're pretty much hidden from the world. Everyone's a stranger.

Unless there's contention for the washroom. In that case, levels of acquaintedness definitely matter. In washrooms around campus, toilets typically outnumber takers, though I have seen fully occupied washrooms. Someone else will walk in, pause for a second, then walk out. At the LaIR computer cluster next to Tressider Student Union, there's a single handicap stall I use every Monday night. I can hear the door open, the feet stop, and the door clatter shut. That's respect for the common man.

Respect has much less importance between friends, however. In a crowded house on a ski trip, it's fair game to encourage others to expedite their business so you can get on with it as well.

There's the knock, then the friendly reminder that others are waiting, then the not so friendly reminder about the time, then the angry demand that you leave and do something unspeakable to yourself. That's just a case of mutual respect for rectums.

After visiting the darkest site on campus and seen what the denizens had written, I needed to return to civilization. I planned to be near the quad around dinnertime and could visit one of the most unique sites on campus: the men's underground washroom in the History Corner. There's an aboveground entrance and several frosted tiles that allow light in during the day. I had been impressed on a brief scavenger hunt visit previously, so I figured it would be a good expedition.

The sun is setting when I open the door into the washroom. The warm light reminds me of a ballroom, and I stand at the top of the grand staircase. I nod to myself slowly, walking down into the washroom as I look at the urinals on the left, marble-topped sinks to the right. The toilet stalls have white, carved wooden walls. They're like painted fences, except for a stall-sized gap between each one. The doors are all closed, but a feet-check reveals one occupant. Without a shared wall and the rumble of a fan, I just pick the closest one and get to work.

The door latches easily, and I set down my backpack. I sit back, taking slightly longer to reach the seat than I had hoped as the toilet seat is a few inches too low. The toilet paper feels nice, tough enough to not disintegrate entirely upon use. I pull the newspaper out of my backpack and finish the job.

I wash my hands, a little disappointed that there wasn't anything more special about the place. It's nice, though perhaps too nice for it to be a home. Although I like cleanliness, there are

too many details for comfort. A house of antiques is beautiful, but tiptoeing through the living room is no way to live.

It was enjoyable, but I don't have a story to tell about my time in the stall. The other occupant is still there, and I walk up to their stall and talk.

"Hey there. I realize this is a little awkward, but do you mind answering a few questions?"

There's a peep. Maybe it was a word, but the fan is a little loud. I just assume that he said yes. He's trapped, right?

"So do you use this washroom often?" It's important to know if I'm talking to a native, or just another explorer.

"No." Alright, I'm pretty sure that it wasn't just a peep. That's not a guy's voice. I can't imagine why a girl would be in here. I'm nervous about it, but it's too late. Besides, I'm in the less awkward situation here. I'm in the appropriately gendered washroom, I know who the random person asking questions is, and I have my pants on.

"So what brings you here?"

"I was just passing by." There's a trend here. No one wants to have a conversation on the can. Maybe my quarry answers the question for lack of anything better to do or politeness, but he or she doesn't want to chat. Well, too bad. My research is more important than any individual's discomfort.

"Umm. So. This washroom is pretty nice, eh?"

"Yeah." Ack. Remember, open-ended questions while interviewing. I fumble for a second, maybe letting out a nervous laugh.

"So do you have a preferred toilet that you use, that's home base for you?"

"I use the one at the track house." Oh, so she's an athlete.

"It's pretty nice? Is it nicer than this one?"

"Yeah, it's clean." I guess that's nice? I look around, grasping for more, but find nothing.

"Okay, thanks!"

Whenever I mention to people that I'm writing about washrooms, they smile with reluctant curiosity.

"Oh, that's hilarious!" they start with a laugh. Unlike most research topics, everyone is apparently an expert on washrooms and has a story I must know, no details withheld.

"Have you visited the outdoor ones along Galvez?"

"This one time, I walked into a hotel bathroom..."

"I had this one friend who couldn't be in the bathroom with anyone else..."

"Oh man, I was with Nick in the bathroom the other night brushing my teeth..."

I disregard most of their previous research since I'm doing my own fieldwork, but I do notice their enthusiasm in telling me everything, an enthusiasm that didn't appear in my on-site interviews. I thought people would talk more under the anonymity of the stall walls, but maybe I just started the conversations the wrong way.

I can understand why everyone wants to talk about washroom culture at the lunch table or while waiting for class to start. Although we all use the washroom independently, we all share similar experiences. We all know how different warm and cold seats are, we all know what it's like coming to the end of a roll of toilet paper with less than a wad, and we all know how hard it is to unbutton pants after holding it in for a half-hour.

That shared-but-separate experience reminds me of talking about home with my peers here at college. Everyone has their favorite local restaurant, their strange high school policies, and their own slang, and we can all vaguely identify with each other. As much as we're willing to share, though, we keep home to ourselves; between academic terms, we all disappear into our own warrens, content to live our own private home life away from everyone else.

I know many of my roommate's stories about his firefighter cousins and his dogs. I have even visited and slept over at his house, eating at the burger joint down the street and meeting his friends. I have told him all of my analogous stories about the pizza buffet and my high school band, but I know he'll never know that home like I do, and I'll never know his. There are just some parts of that experience and some feelings that I'll never understand, and that's what makes a home home.

It's the end of the week, research has gone fine, and I can go home. Daily in hand, I walk in and take a seat in the Robinson 3rd floor washroom, outside stall. Uncharacteristically, the seat looks dirty, so I pull out one of the "cowboy hats" and lay it down on the seat. The tail sags down into the bowl, and I turn to sit. The seat reaches me exactly when I expect it, and the lights are just bright enough for me to read the Daily.

Shortly after, I hear someone else enter, go through the preparatory actions, then sit down. I guess I have one last interview to do.

"How it's going?" I'm trying to think about who on the floor is around that I hadn't just seen watching "South Park" or doing homework.

"It's going pretty well." Oh, it's the other Kevin on the floor. Good times.

"You going to the game?" The Stanford football starts in about 45 minutes.

"Yeah. I'm not looking forward to walking, though." We chat for a bit about his bike being in the shop, and it's all very friendly. I, however, discover an odd trait about human physiology. Apparently, God felt that humans shouldn't be able to operate both their mouths and their sphincters simultaneously. As pleasant as it is to talk to Kevin, I'm not getting anywhere on my primary purpose. The conversation dies down, and I go back to the newspaper.

"I'm glad that whoever it is leaves the newspaper in here," he says a few seconds later, hearing the ruffle.

"Yeah, that's me." I'm pretty proud. I wouldn't read it otherwise, but the Daily has become a regular fixture in my day by being paired with a very necessary activity. Since then, I've become a very passionate reader and leave it in the stalls when I'm done. "Want a page?" I separate part of it, and reach under the stall to give it to him, careful not to let my hand cross the invisible plane into his stall.

"Sure, thanks."