

Bathroom Blues

by Cynthia Crane

A few years ago, in the annex of the Cincinnati Art Museum, I waited in line to use one of two working toilets in the ladies room. I paced impatiently outside while the women in the stalls discussed their marriages. I continued to wait, less quietly, as one woman began to talk about her romance with her husband (they parked on the street where they used to make out in high school). I knew I would be stewing a while. I shuffled my feet and then left the bathroom to study some paintings. When I walked back in, the women's *kaffee klatsch* continued full-force from their respective stalls. One woman sighed, "I have to wait on him hand and foot when he's sick like I'm a nurse or something." I left. When I returned a third time, the woman with a wavy perm (she detailed the hair procedure in the stalls) was talking sarcastically: she had told a mutual friend (whom neither had seen in a while) how she had been doing "nothing really" the past five years, just raising three children and losing her mind. I was losing my mind, patience, and bladder control.

A lifetime of this interminable waiting-in-line compelled me to contemplate a woman's predicament. Why don't public locales have extra bathroom stalls for women? Haven't building managers noticed that men rush in and out while women stand in lines that extend into lobbies and wrap around corners like snakes? An obvious indication of an unfulfilled need. And who in business isn't looking to fill needs these days? It is basic economics. In order to enforce this demand and lack of supply, women must rally together and petition for more bathroom space.

If lobbying for additional women's restrooms doesn't pan out, and we cannot keep enough toilets obstruction-free and functioning, then we might want to adopt the "mover and shaker" mentality. I am a veteran of the *know-how-to-go-to-the-bathroom-quickly* school.

Because in college I "walked in and got it done," fellow students accused me of displaying masculine tendencies, a perception harbored at a church-affiliated liberal arts institution where feminism trickled in ten years after I graduated. In college, if you frequented the bars (the ones where the floors were perpetually sticky as if the owners had thrown beer lacquer on the linoleum), you had to learn the "tricks of the trade." Just like the lines at the art museum, the bar's restroom lines often wound outside, which necessitated a system of going to the toilet in less than a minute flat. In college no one expressed either mercy or politeness. Women banged on the stall doors (although not as loudly as men), and if a toilet was stopped up, we never looked down or complained.

If you were brave, sly, and quick, you could run into the men's restroom and have one of your friends (a loyal one) guard the door against intruders. There was never a line for the men's room. Men didn't stand around to chat to their buddies or, as some women imagined, to compare their private parts. For men, young and old, going to the bathroom was and is just one more hassle in life that must be done and forgotten. No make-up. No gossip. Back to the party.

Perhaps bathroom behavior derives from cultural constructions of gender, and long lines are more than likely a result of a woman's social conditioning, that a woman is not a Woman unless she exhibits impeccable hygiene. And this takes time. And creates long lines. Or, our clothing, impractical and arduous, slows us down and keeps us engaged in time-consuming conversations about how elephantine or gawky we look in an outfit, or how we need two pairs of hands to get dressed. Or, women's urological alarms go off simultaneously. At any rate, we arrive at the same conclusion: larger bathrooms for women.

In the third round of waiting at the art museum annex, I squelched my discomfort and empathized. I did not bang on the door or clear my throat with an ah-hum or cough. These women were talking, prizing an intimate break from their regular lives, lives that might not offer the freedom or space to chat. Space that we would like more of in public facilities. Finally, one of them got up ever so slowly and...what a wonderful sound! I was definitely next in line.