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すみません、トイレはどこですか
(Sumimasen, toire wa dokodesuka?)

माफ़ कीजिए, बाथरूम कहाँ है?
(Maaf keejiye, baathroom kahaan hai?)

Excusez-moi, ou sont les toilettes?

Excuse me, where is the bathroom?

Bathroom is one of those words that immediately calls up images for most people. If we are fortunate enough to have stable housing, it is something each of us has. Its features are relatively universal: some mechanism for disposing of waste, some way of cleaning one's self. These look different in different places, the European separation of water closet and tub and sink or the spigot with a bucket in the yard that is in every Indian household to the North American combining of all these functions in one space. The bathroom is often dismissed as a purely functional space, a place of necessity rather than meaning. Yet, for me, it is a sanctuary, a rare pocket of solitude in a world that constantly demands movement, productivity, and engagement.

In this small, enclosed space, I am free to strip away the physical and emotional weight of the day, to reset and reclaim a sense of self. But the significance of the bathroom extends beyond personal comfort. Cleanliness has long been tied to societal values, where order, discipline, and even morality are measured by how well one maintains their body and space. Rituals of washing, grooming, and self maintenance are not just acts of hygiene but performances of control, echoing broader cultural expectations about purity and respectability. That is the ability to "liv[e] a life of dignity and shar[e] fully in society's opportunities" (Chatfield 4). The bathroom, then, is not just

a private retreat; it is a microcosm of society's obsession with purification, both literal and symbolic. In this essay, I will explore the bathroom as both a deeply personal refuge and a reflection of larger societal constructs. Through my own connection to this space, I will examine how cleanliness, solitude, and self-maintenance shape identity and reinforce cultural narratives about purity, order, and worth.

This particular bathroom, mine, is painted and fitted in a shade of purple that evoked the 1970s, a retro nugget of time frozen inside the home. Despite its vintage color scheme, the space was filled with modern décor, computer-generated flowers on the shower curtain, an anime fairy floated on the toilet mat, and sleek, minimalist containers held two nearly identical blue-and-white toothbrushes. These toothbrushes are frequently mixed up, by sleepy eyes and under caffeinated hands fumbling through morning routines. The contrast between the room's aged palette and its digital-era embellishments makes it feel like a place caught between two epochs, nostalgic roots shaping the present.

Another blending of contrasts appeared in the air itself, where scents mixed in an unusual harmony, both sterile and warm, both artificial and natural. Dettol and sandalwood, with the ever-present scent of cats. The cold, spotless mirror loomed over the modest sink, reflecting the room with an almost sterile precision, while the toilet sat still, waiting for its next occupant. A rhythmic tapping came from the bidet, a constant reminder of its amateur and hasty installation. At the start and end of the day, the bathroom is the one constant. Most days, I move between different jobs, different rooms, and even different cities, sometimes, I don't even sleep in my house. Yet no matter where I am, the/a bathroom remains a place where I can step away from everything and everyone and just be by myself, selflessly, unapologetically.

My bedroom can not be my sanctuary, because it is shared with my partner, cluttered with laundry, the bed isn't as comfortable as I remember, the sheets lack the softness of others I've known, and the lighting is harsh and uninviting. The bathroom, however, is small, easy to clean, and undeniably private. It is where I disrobe, where I feel cleaner, where I prepare for/decompress from my day. After hours handling people's phones and sometimes standing shoulder to shoulder with them, close enough to wonder if I will ever feel completely clean again, hoping for the best, at the end of the night, stepping into the bathroom offers a different kind of cleansing. There is an unspoken rule that governs bathroom doors, when one is closed, no further questions are asked. Society, in its endless demands, makes few allowances for personal space, yet it accepts that people need sleep and people need to use the bathroom. Even prisoners are given a bed and a bucket. In that sense, this privilege is an absolute right.

I share this bathroom with my husband and two cats. While each of us wants or needs to use it at similar times, we manage to avoid collisions or confrontations over its space. If we were the nuclear family with a wife, husband, 3.2 kids, we might find it very difficult to take time to reflect, to relax and decompress. It would become a space of pure utility. Get in, do your business, get out. Someone else is always beating down the door waiting to use it. We are further privileged in that we have a bathroom that is ours. We are not forced, like some, to seek out public spaces that are controlled or denied us or even non-existent. We will never have the indignity of washing up in a McDonalds bathroom sink while other people constantly come in and out to piss.

I am incredibly fortunate to be able to find sanctuary in my bathroom. Many do not have this. I can retreat into this space for solitude, cleansing, and self-maintenance but those without bathrooms are denied the most basic access to even hygiene. The ability to step into a private

space to reset and reclaim a sense of self is something many of us take for granted. For those without this refuge, survival takes precedence over solace and dignity is often compromised in the absence of something as fundamental as a clean, secure bathroom. My bathroom is the silent architect of how I present to the world. Those without access to such spaces are met with judgment rather than empathy. Cleanliness, order, and presentation shape perceptions of respectability. Those unable to meet these arbitrary standards are denied social acceptance, dignity and opportunities that I am afforded without question. The bathroom is not just a place of comfort, it is a dividing line between those who can retreat and re-emerge polished and those for whom even basic self-maintenance is a challenge. This forces me to recognize both my own fortune and also the systemic inequities that strip others of the very sanctuary I cherish.

Reflection

My exploration of this bathroom is inspired by the approaches of both Hiromi Goto and Anton Chekhov. Goto leans into intimate, sensory details to anchor personal struggles with identity and belonging. “Something smelled tinny and slightly sweet” (Goto 1) reminded me how important it is to remember smell to elicit an emotion and how how you smell plays a big part in how you are perceived by the world. Like Goto, I have used a small, personal space to tap into broader themes of selfhood and societal expectations. Chekhov captures the solitude within Russia and the quiet complexities of ordinary life. How, for instance “the charming, light adventure [if needing to pee], inevitably developed… into a problem of excessive complication leading to an intolerably irksome situation” (Chekhov 72) of trying to find somewhere to do so.

The bathroom serves as a lens for examining cultural ideas about solitude and self-care, reflecting societal trends in how we navigate personal boundaries and carve out space for

ourselves. Through this essay, I've realized how even the smallest, most overlooked spaces can pulse with meaning, serving as mirrors to both individual identity and collective human experience.

Works Cited

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