

Behind the Stall



Secrets, Safety, and
Sisterhood in Women's
Bathrooms

GIRLS

U
L O O K
H O T ♡

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A DRUNK STUMBLE. A blurry haze of lights. Hallways lined with warm bodies. Blasting, thumping, thunderous music. The urge to flee the chaos or the simple need to pee. Suddenly, there you are—the women's restroom—the air changes.

From middle school to clubbing downtown in our 20s, restrooms have always been a sanctuary for women. Here, we share more than just a space. We share our tears, laughter, fears, and victories. The sanctuary of the bathroom is a bond that unites us, a shared experience that never leaves us. Frequently, the only clear memories of the blurry nights come from the sanctuary of stalls. It brings us back.

We remember it in the morning, reminisce in our post-night-out run-downs, and laugh at the conversations we had with girls we met in the bathroom and will probably never talk to again.

Women are often pitted against each other due to assumptions that they can not get along, that they are less competent, or that they are overly emotional. They face constant scrutiny. Even something as simple as going to the bathroom with a friend is frequently met with sexist comments.

"You need help going to the bathroom?" "What are you guys doing in there?" "Can I come?"

Men often wonder, "What even goes on in there?"

Yet once we get to the bathroom, those stereotypes dissolve. We wait in long lines, thumping our feet in an attempt to

alleviate the urge to pop the seal on our bladders. We complain about that one drunk guy who can't seem to get a grip and keep his hands to himself. Women share clothing advice, hair tips, what clubs they plan on hitting up through the night, and complaints about bartenders, bouncers, and boyfriends.

The conversation heard in the restroom contains people's secrets, embracements, and fears.

The bathroom provides a helping hand in the wake of the shocking reality that the club is not all fun and games. The harsh reality that women face constant threats to their safety is also there. Yet, in the bathroom, our past experiences teach us that fear lessens and that a helping hand can be found.

In a study done by the American Addiction Center, 56% of women said they had their drinks unknowingly spiked (to put alcohol or drugs into someone's drink without their knowledge or permission), 31% of those incidents occurred at a bar and 8% at clubs.

It is no surprise that bartenders, club owners, and patrons are aware of the troubling situations that can occur in nightlife venues. This awareness has led to the creation of the Angel Shot. An



Angel Shot is not a drink order but a discreet request for help. When someone orders an Angel Shot, it signals to the staff that the person is in an uncomfortable situation and requires assistance. Similarly, the restroom becomes a place of safety, a refuge where women look out for each other.

The restroom comrades share passing stories.

“That one man grabbed me,” says Drunk Girl Number One.

“Who!? If you see him, it’s on sight. You tell me,” Drunk Girl Number Two responds.

“I’ll f---ing punch him,” Drunk Girl Number Three says.

Whether it’s a ripped top, an extra hair tie, or a 5-foot-5, 110 pound bodyguard, the women’s bathroom presents all kinds of solutions.

One can overhear women sharing stories about what brought them to the club in the first place.

When arguing with another woman or when a man sets us against each other, we might reflect on the club bathroom with somber nostalgia, yearning for the solidarity found there to be present with us everywhere.

Back in the bathroom, one drunk woman shares that she and her short-term boyfriend recently broke up.

A cheer of “No way,” “He doesn’t deserve you,” and “You are so gorgeous” come

from the other women finding reprieve in the restroom.

Emily, let’s call her, shares tales of her summer fling, which burned bright and burned out. During their brief fling, she got a small tattoo of his initials, a cursive “AW,” on her left hip. She lifts her skirt to show the comrades in the loo.

Another drunk restroom resident squeals, “Me too.” Sarah, let’s call her, and Emily begins to compare stories of their burning flings and almost matching hip tattoos of initials from boyfriends who are long gone.

Often, we wish the
alcove of the stalls
mirrored what the rest
of the world could be.

The girls leave the restroom separately just as they come with murmurs of “Oh my gosh, I am so drunk” leaving their lips.

A common consensus in the women’s bathroom is the sudden realization of intoxication. The constant movement of the club suddenly disappears; the lights are on, and the music is muffled. The need to scream over club classics is gone, making us realize our voices are worn out and our feet hurt.

It is important to note that each woman’s experience in the bathroom is unique.



Viviana Valle Gomez, Associate Director of Women, Gender, and Sexual Equity at UCSB and a former Wildcat employee, spoke on the matter.

Saying, "It's true that bathrooms can be a safe haven for people when they're out clubbing or at bars, or in places that have so many stimuli that you don't know what can be good from bad, but there are limitations to that feeling. Not everyone feels that."

Gomez goes on to explain, "There's the very in-your-face bit about trans women in bathrooms, or trans people overall in bathrooms, or in certain bathrooms." Gomez adds, "It also can play into sexuality. Let's say you're going into a woman's bathroom, and you're a masc lesbian. Your interactions are completely different than someone like me... because I'm femme presenting, I will be included into that space much quicker and without hesitation than someone who may present differently."

At the club, the bathroom residents will often take a moment to reconnect with their bodies, realizing "that fall definitely is going to leave a bruise" and "I am standing still, but the room is spinning."

Or maybe it is the opposite. Maybe overhearing one of those notorious drunk bathroom talks bring the realization that "I am too sober and need another vodka cran."

One might think of the women's bathroom as a creation based on need, but women's restrooms have a deep history. Before modern plumbing, women had separate parlors and sitting areas, places for escape. Their initial purpose was to protect women's virtue. The idea was that women of sensible and delicate backgrounds would need a reprieve from social gatherings. Later developments include the toilet.

While most clubs do not include a Victorian sitting area (one could easily

argue that they should), the sentiment remains: chats and rants held in the bathroom prove that women have reclaimed these spaces. They have evolved to be a space of safety and camaraderie.

Gomez addressed this sentiment, saying, "In many ways, we can trace the genealogies of the bathrooms at clubs to the first wave of feminism, of feminist consciousness-raising circles. They used to be in people's living rooms, and now it's harder to connect with people out in the world. So, public restrooms become that place."

Every moment spent together, however fleeting, carries an unspoken bond. Together, we navigate a world that can be both empowering and perilous. In an often isolating society, these shared experiences in the restroom highlight a profound truth: together, women create their own protective enclave, ensuring that no one has to face the world alone. For all the fast and fleeting friendships made in the women's bathroom, a familiar parting often includes "Stay safe." **W**

