

Dear Lady in the Women's Washroom

LOOSE END

Ivan Coyote / Vancouver / Thursday, September 22, 2011

I can only surmise from our recent interaction that I startled you in the women's washroom at the mall today. I guess I don't look much like what you seem to think a female washroom user should.

This is not the first time this has happened to me; in fact, this was not the first time this happened to me this week. Forgive me if I was not as patient with you as you seemed to feel I should have been, but I would like to point out that your high-pitched squeal startled me, and I needed to urinate very badly. Perhaps I was not as gracious as I could have been.

To ensure that the next time this happens to you, or me, things go more smoothly for everyone involved, I have jotted down a couple of notes for your reference.

Not everyone fits easily into one of the two options provided on your standard public washroom doors. In my world, gender is a spectrum, not a binary. Just because an individual does not present as what you feel a woman should look like does not mean that person does not belong there.

Public washrooms are just that: public. This means that you do not get to decide whom you share them with. I would like to remind you that everyone, regardless of their gender identity or presentation, needs to pee.

For some of us, public washrooms are stressful places. We generally avoid them whenever possible. Please, rest assured that if I have chosen to enter a public washroom in spite of my long and arduous history with them, I have taken the time to note which door I am about to walk into, and that I am confident I have chosen the lesser of two evils.

I am, in fact, hyper aware of which bathroom I am in. It is not necessary for you to stare at me, pointedly refer to the graphic on the door or discuss my decision loudly with your companions. Gawking, elbowing your friend and repeatedly clearing your throat are also not helpful. Trust me, I will be in and out as quick as is humanly possible.

The next time this happens to you, I would like you to think twice before screaming. I would like you to imagine what it feels like to be me. Imagine being screeched at by a perfect stranger. Now imagine being screeched at when you really need to pee, or your tampon gave out 20 minutes ago. Sucks, doesn't it?

I want you to know that I understand wanting to feel safe from men while using the bathroom in a public place. This is, in fact, the primary reason I don't just use the other bathroom. That, and I have a very delicate sense of smell and don't like returning filthy toilet seats to the down position.

I also would like you to know that trans and genderqueer people suffer from many more bladder infections, urinary tract issues and general pee-related health problems than the general population. I humbly ask you to consider why this might be the case.

I would also like you to know that I have had the great pleasure of spending time with seven-year-old and eight-year-old tomboys lately. Both young girls have experienced serious bullying at school and day camp over their gender presentation, especially in and around the question of gendered bathrooms. They have both come home from school in tears, and one of them even quit science camp because of it.

Hearing that these two sweet, kind, amazing children have already experienced “the bathroom problem” that I so often face myself not only broke my heart, it enraged me. I feel that this type of bullying has impeded their ability to access a public education, and affected their desire to participate in valuable activities outside of school as well.

I would like you to consider how this might affect their self-esteem, their grades and their sense of self-worth. I remind you that they are just little kids. They are only in elementary school, and it has started already. Not such a little thing after all, is it?

I ask you to forgive me my impatience with you at the mall today. But how could I possibly not think of my two little friends and feel anything but rage?

See, when you scream at me without thinking in the women’s washroom, you are implicating yourself in a rigid, two-party gender system that tells others it is okay to discriminate against people like me. Even little children who are like me.

This is the very same attitude that results in queer youth suicides and high school murderers being acquitted because the dead boy asked for it by wearing a skirt and makeup. It is this same attitude that turns its head when trans women are shot at by off-duty police officers and denied services at women’s shelters. It is this kind of sentiment that says it is okay to deny us housing, or a job, or the right to adopt children or dance on a freaking reality television show.

If you think I am making any of this up, then I encourage you to open up your newspaper and have another look.

I would like to remind you that this very same two-party gender system is enforced on me and others like me every day, policed by people just like you. It starts very young, and sometimes is subtle, as small as a second look on the way out of a bathroom stall, but sometimes it is deafening, and painful, and violent — even murderous.

So, the next time you meet up with someone like me in the “ladies’ room,” please think twice before screaming. I am not there by accident. In fact, I spent a lot more time looking at the sign on the door than you ever have.