

BATHROOM STORIES:

A couple interviews each other

Heather Johnson and Svetlana Kitto

HEATHER: I have a memory of going to a bathroom.

SVETLANA: Yeah.

HEATHER: Well, I am not a traditional looking woman. [*Laughs.*] And I have a picture of myself in my twenties. You can see what some of the issues a 1990s lesbian would be having in public restrooms. I was very masculine identified, still am, and one memory that sticks out the most would be the time I had to go to the bathroom in Union Station in Washington, DC. I was wearing all black with a black leather jacket, cut-off black T-shirt underneath. And I was nervous to go to the bathroom because I was aware that I wasn't looking particularly feminine that day. Usually I would try to do something to feminize me if possible, to make the entry into the bathroom, bathrooms such as Union Station, more comfortable, cause I mean, there's so much traffic in there, and I'm really tall.

SVETLANA: She is.

HEATHER: And at that time I had a shaved head and stuff, with three little tufts on top of my head. So it wasn't like I could pass very well at all. So I just decided to have some courage and to go in there like I belonged in there. And that's what I did. I started strutting into the bathroom, and there was a line of women to go in, but it was moving, so women were coming out and women were going in, and I was in line, and I was probably about halfway up, the turnover was pretty quick, and I was probably almost about to go into a stall, when a cop rushed up behind me and grabbed my

jacket. And I thought it was someone behind me; I didn't realize it was a cop. And I was like, "What the fuck," you know? She turns me around, and she's like, "You can't be in here." And I said, "Why not?" She's like, "This is a women's restroom." At that point everybody's looking, and it's a woman cop, and someone said, "She *is* a woman." Or they might've said, "*It* is a woman." I'm not sure. I just wanted to go to the bathroom. But it was so embarrassing. And she was like, "Oh, I'm sorry." She apologized, but it was just so embarrassing and shaming. You know, there's this look that people give you: they look for a breast or some identifier that you're a woman, you know? So there was that like, up and down, and checking out my jacket. It just felt really invasive and terrifying. And everybody was looking at me, and so many people were in there, in the bathroom, and so I just went to the stall, and just couldn't pee. You know, I was frozen. I couldn't get anything to come out. I was shaking and nervous and scared to leave the stall. It was like my adrenaline was so high. I was in there for a while.

After that, I really had panic attacks going into public restrooms. It would just be so hard. I'd start to hyperventilate. Then I started getting UTIs because I was holding it for too long, just trying to find a place that had a stall, just one stall, not like a series of stalls. Sometimes I would go in with the guys, especially in those kind of places, because the one thing that felt safe about men's rooms is that no one looks at each other. There's no eye contact. In fact, eye contact is avoided at all costs. It's like, gay or something. So I can walk into a guys' bathroom, go into a stall, and just feel so much safer there. But a couple of times men recognized me, especially black men would recognize me. And then they would kind of raise their eyebrows, like I was looking for something, you know? Which was also scary, cause I was like, *I'm not in here looking for business either.* Especially in those kind

of public restrooms. That was just my fear: that they were looking for something, not like that's really what it was. But that kind of recognition—it just didn't feel safe anywhere.

Eventually, as I grew older, I grew my hair out a little longer, and now I don't have as much trouble with being less recognized as much, but I think it's because of the education that's gone on in the country, especially in New York City, where people are really aware that there's trans people around. But when I'm in the South, I get looks, more looks than I do here. The South is still very much two-gendered spaces, so then it brings back memories of just like, *oh my god*. But now I have to go in with another attitude. My attitude now is like, I am a woman, and you should know that women come in all shapes and sizes and look differently, and I belong here. And that sort of attitude kind of shuts people up before they say anything to me. So that's my story.

SVETLANA: I don't have any stories, I mean it's just like a—

HEATHER: It doesn't have to be a traumatic story. It could be a funny story. I'm sure there's a thousand tampon stories.

SVETLANA: What's happened to me in public bathrooms? I've done drugs in public bathrooms. I've had sex in public bathrooms.

HEATHER: What kind of drugs?

SVETLANA: Oh, like when I was in my early twenties and I was doing cocaine and stuff. The bathroom became a place that we would go. There was this club I used to go to in Los Feliz in L.A., and you're just kind of watching who has the cocaine, and are they going to invite you to come back, and the whole night is about trying to make sure that you get invited to—*[laughs]*. Or if you're the one who has it, you know, it's just so gross because it's

so much about making sure you have enough, basically, to share, and who gets to have it and who doesn't. It's pretty nasty. But it was fun.

HEATHER: Power position.

SVETLANA: Yeah. I mean, I would sometimes be in that position, but I would often not be, because I often wouldn't have a lot of money, and also wouldn't really want to commit to actually buying it. I just wanted to pretend like I wasn't really doing it, but I was. And what else?

HEATHER: You said sex in the bathroom.

SVETLANA: I did. I mean, yeah. *[Laughs.]*

HEATHER: What's that about?

SVETLANA: Well, when I was younger, it was like the only way I could feel alive was if I did things that had an illicit quality to them, so to keep myself interested I'd want to have sex in a public bathroom, or in the bathroom on an airplane or in a park. It was like that was how I felt connected to someone, was through doing something that had a heightened quality to it that felt dangerous. Just being with someone and tolerating when things are quiet or things are boring felt so impossible to me when I was younger. If there was any moment of feeling not intensity then I didn't want to be there. So I just wanted intensity all the time.

HEATHER: The bathrooms brought that.

SVETLANA: Yeah, I guess so. I got my period in a public bathroom. At Marie Callender's, which is a chain restaurant.

HEATHER: Yeah, it's the best.

SVETLANA: The best pie and the best chicken pot pie. I was 13. I was a person who was very happy to get my period. That's the

kind of girl I was. I was like, “Yay, I got my period. I’m growing up.” Because I felt very un-grown up.

HEATHER: How old were you?

SVETLANA: I was 13. So I wasn’t super young. I was on the older side I guess. Or like middle, I don’t know.

HEATHER: I got mine when I was 11. Fourth or fifth grade.

SVETLANA: Whoa, that’s young.

HEATHER: Yeah. Big, thick pads.

SVETLANA: Yeah. My stepmom taught me how to use o.b.s. I was really young, like 14.

HEATHER: I wasn’t allowed to use those because my mom said, “You’ll know when you’re old enough to use those. You’ll know where to put it.” *[Laughs.]* Well, what about bathrooms as gathering spaces? A safe space to go in? Did you ever experience that, this idea of camaraderie in the bathroom? When I was a little, little girl, like under teenage years, we would run into the bathroom to do all of our talking, like at school.

SVETLANA: Yeah, well definitely—whoa, oh my god. All I can think of is bad things I did in the bathroom. This is a funny story. When I was like 11 or 10, I was in the car with my dad. Both my parents smoked my whole life. Both of them smoked like 40 to 60 cigarettes a day, like chronic, crazy smokers, and I mean, actually, as I’m saying this, it’s funny, cause it reminds me of how I talk to you sometimes, so I apologize already. But I said to my dad in the car, I said, “Dad, you have to quit smoking.”

HEATHER: *[Laughing.]* That sounds like you.

SVETLANA: I was like—and he always reminds me of this—I said, “You know, Dad, it’s bad enough that you want to kill yourself and leave me an orphan. But that you would want to take me with you”—cause this was in the days of the second-hand smoke awareness—and he quit! And then flash-forward one year, I get caught smoking in the bathroom of my junior high. And suspended.

HEATHER: Oh god. That’s so perfect.

SVETLANA: You have a great new bathroom in your new place.

HEATHER: Yeah. I mean, to me, bathrooms have always been a safe space. Like bathrooms alone.

SVETLANA: Yeah, well I would like you to talk about how—

HEATHER: How I lose time in the bathroom?

SVETLANA: How she loses time in the bathroom. So she sets a timer.

HEATHER: I call bathrooms time traveling, cause it’s like, you go in there, and it already sounds like an echo chamber. It’s a beautiful sort of—it reminds me of the womb, you know?

SVETLANA: Yeah.

HEATHER: It’s like a warm space that’s just for you, you know? And to be able to go in there and just be in your most comfortable state, and also feel completely held. *[Laughs.]* That’s the right word for it. I do feel very held by bathrooms.

SVETLANA: *[Laughs.]*

HEATHER: I don’t know. So I go in there and I lose time. The other thing that I do in bathrooms, especially public bathrooms, is that I feel

the need to clean them before I use them.

SVETLANA: My thing about that is like, I agree, public bathrooms are disgusting. So why would you want to spend any more time in there than you have to?

HEATHER: Because I have to use it, and I can't use a disgusting bathroom.

SVETLANA: You just don't touch anything!

HEATHER: It's impossible.

SVETLANA: You just crouch. And you just pee and you just run out.

HEATHER: I'm like, six feet tall; something touches something. So I want to make sure whatever that thing is is covered in paper towels and tissues. So I'm in there like, papering the walls with tissues and paper.

SVETLANA: Well, all of that is to say I'm glad you use a timer now. [*Laughs.*] Oh, I was talking to [a friend] about this, and [they were] like, "For me, it was from my childhood. The bathroom was the only place I could lock the door." I'll just say that for me, right now, the bathroom is the only place where when I call my cat, she will come. I can be anywhere else in the house and she pretends like she doesn't know her name, like I'm not even there, but if I'm sitting on the toilet peeing, and I say "Aurora!" she runs over. It's the weirdest thing. What do you think that's about? I've asked you this before. I'm often asking you to analyze my cat's psychology to me.

HEATHER: Well, I think it's about—

SVETLANA: Me being trapped? You said something before like it's about—

HEATHER: Well, I read this article where it said that cats find that—this was from a pet

psychic—they said that the cat finds that being with their owner in the bathroom is the only place where their owner isn't thinking about a million things at once, and they're just like, super open and present. So they really feel like they're being seen, whereas in other parts of the house, the owner's usually watching television or thinking about work, or super scattered, and the bathroom is the one place where they know they're going to get special attention.

SVETLANA: Well, that's true.

HEATHER: I have to say, the cat that I live with doesn't have to do that because she gets my special undivided attention all over the house. [*Laughs.*] Except in the bathroom, where I'm thinking about 1,000 things and lose track of time. I'm the opposite. When I'm in the bathroom, that's when I think about the most things.

SVETLANA: But also the difference is that you have a roommate, and when I pee, my door is open. It's never closed.

HEATHER: Yeah, sometimes she'll come in there and sit and just look at me.

SVETLANA: Just thinking about my cat makes me happy. But Erin told me that she was doing this bathroom publication, she was like, "You should do something for it." And I was like, "Oh, maybe I'll do something about how my cat always comes to the bathroom." And she made a face, like—she just kind of glazed over. But I still found a way to talk about it.

HEATHER: You're gonna cut this out of the article.

SVETLANA: No, I don't think so.