

STALLED SYMPHONY

The women in the Hearthstone Mall bathroom are like horses at the gate, competing in a race they don't understand, didn't sign up for, won't admit exists. Some lope, some snort, ready to charge. Others preen, smoothing wrinkles, checking armpits for unwanted odors, yanking out underwear elastic from in between buttocks and swearing at Hanes for such shitty design, but then, what do you expect for \$2.99? Their thoughts, sounds, voices, come together as they will not, even though they are decent people, even though they are genetically programmed to nurture and taught to listen, and even though on this particular day all of them share a strong desire to feel less alone.

In stall number two, breathing through her mouth like a Lamaze class overachiever: a tall, sturdy, sixty-year-old woman with hair dyed the color of rusted iron. Snuck out for a chili cheese dog before she was expected back for Lean Cuisines with her husband, Fred, who'd recently been diagnosed with heart disease. The lack of salt on their table made her want to cry. And, like punishment, Carolyn has the shits now as she studies the scratched pale peach metal of the stall door, showing its age like the back of her hands. Some fifteen years since the opening of Hearthstone Mall. Never had the town been so excited. Brand new. A place to gather. Big skylights and food from all corners of the world. Her daughters had spent more time here than at school that first year, but they're gone now and she doesn't expect them back.

She tries to be quiet and flushes every few minutes. What will the next woman in line think when she smells the horrible odor left behind? Maybe she shouldn't care, but she does, and *this* is the stuff of humiliation - her body's sounds and smells – more so than the chili cheese dog

or the lie she'll tell her husband later. Only here, among women, does she feel exposed and unnatural. She knows the men in the blue bathroom next door don't care. And why is that, she wonders as she breathes shallowly through her mouth; why should she feel ashamed to run into her neighbor or her dental hygienist and have them know she's got the runs? It's not catching, far as she knows.

Two doors down, a girl only a few years younger than Carolyn's daughters is throwing up, mostly hidden by the room's odd, guttural symphony: the rush of water, splash of urine, wretch, swoosh, the clang of a door against hinges, the rattle of a toilet paper roll turned on its axis as the girl pulls frantically for the paper to wipe her mouth. She says, "Shit," because she's pretty sure she's gotten slime in her hair and will have to wash it out in front of everyone.

Inside the stall, everything is almost private. The vomiting girl is a freshman in college and under considerable stress. She's put on weight since she left home, but no one at home knows yet because she hasn't been back since September. Maybe food is home now. Three burgers purchased at discrete intervals and a slice of pizza, all summarily purged from her system. From her designer handbag (a gift from mom, the day she left for college), she pulls a travel-size bottle of nail polish remover and like a little prayer, holds it in one hand and inhales three times.

She's ready to charge now; running on fumes for real (her father a management consultant who uses phrases like "running on fumes" and "lowering the water in the lake"). She Googled him once. He's quite famous, and considered a real hard-ass. He may even have coined the water-in-the-lake idea but to her it's really depressing. You work hard to fix problems at work, school, wherever, and the water is all of the work, the details, and you never get anywhere

because as the water falls, these boulders rise up. Her father loves the boulders. He fixes them, or blasts them, or whatever. She, on the other hand, is drowning.

A young mother has her third child in the handicap stall. The other children are out in the food court with their father, but this one's the terror. Mom's completely given up on papering the seat for little Caitlin, because she just writhes so much that it falls off anyway. She puts the child on the seat, tells her not to kick Mommy (a mistake – the power of suggestion; mommy grunts as dear little Caitlin gets her in the ribs). Mommy stands up. Fuck it. If the kid falls off, it's her own fault. She rubs her new bruise. Caitlin laughs and sits back, her urine streaming up into the air. Mommy moves just in time and this little triumph is like a gift from God. She smiles at Caitlin. "Let's wipe you now." Wipes her daughter; buckles her pants. Usually, she makes the girl wait in the stall and tries her hardest to keep her from touching everything (always a complete failure). This time, she lets her out. Slams the door. Mommy's turn. Caitlin bangs on the door, and Mommy wonders why the hell she hasn't done this all along. She can see the demonic little feet, so she knows little Caitlin's okay. And Mommy can paper the seat and sit, carefully straddling the pool of piss her daughter left in front of the toilet like a drunken college boyfriend. She can take her fucking time. Bam, bam, bam, mommy, mommy, mommy, flush, clang, swish. Music.

Next door, completely unaware of the seriousness of the mother's distress, a very nice German seamstress named Marta is trying to silently empty her bowels, but only gas will come. She doesn't want anyone to hear, and thank God that horrible child is making such a fuss. Marta usually avoids these public stalls. She'd rather find a corner somewhere to pass gas, but she's with her sister-in-law today and the bathroom is an escape. Her entire two-hundred-pound body strains to control the noises, as if it's more polite to unleash dainty little puffs of air than the

tremendous rumbling that would bring her relief. Her rude, stuttering sounds alternate with the creak of the toilet; 250 pounds shifting side to side.

The 15-year-old next door hears the farts and the give of the toilet seat and can see the woman's trunk-like ankles overflowing a pair of slip-on Keds. The girl laughs out loud. She doesn't care. She has brothers. They perform heavy metal fart ballads. They show off the length of their turds and are psyched if they stink up the whole house. Like they've just painted a masterpiece. Fucking dogs, she thinks. Boys are like dogs. She's prowling for something different. Someone older.

She checks quickly to be sure she hasn't started her period, because she felt something moist when she was shopping at The Gap, but it was just the usual stuff flowing from her vagina. (She'd asked her mom about it once, and been taken immediately to see Dr. Dipshit, who looked very earnestly at her and asked if she was feeling any discomfort and was she sexually active? She opened her eyes wide like Bambi and said no, of course not. Her mother smiled. The doc said maybe he should take a look and she said no, she'd rather not. (If he pushed it, she was ready to kick him in the nuts, but he let it go). Her mother smiled again. Everyone was happy, and she'd never mentioned her vagina again). Instead, the girl bought magazines. They helped. *Cosmo* practically catalogued the different sorts of gunk a girl could expect and what they meant. No one really appreciates the educational value of *Cosmo*, she thinks. They fucking should.

The demon child has moved into an empty stall and is banging the door shut again and again, shaking the entire structure of peach-painted steel. All of the women grit their teeth. Some of them hope she'll smash her fingers. Teach her a lesson. The mother thinks ever so briefly of her daughter diving into the toilet and swimming away. Embarrassment overcomes her. She finishes her business. Screaming as she wipes, "Caitlin. Stop it *right now*. I mean it."

The first stall is out of paper and so it remains empty. 250-pound Marta decides that she will wait for the room to clear, unless her snotty sister-in-law comes looking for her. She doesn't want to look at anyone. She picks at her nail polish and thinks: Time to hit the salon. Her nails are the only thing she has that look good. She started up with the acrylics because of a woman who hired her to let out a wedding dress. The woman was big, but she had great makeup and perfect nails and the kind of confidence that feels a little like a shove.

Marta can hear the girl throwing up two stalls over. She could go that way, splurge-and-purge, but it seems like trying to hold back the ocean. Her body feels padded with armor; like she needs the extra fat cells between her and the world. She scratches at a scab on her arm. Watches it bleed. Flesh is fragile. She could be strong, she thinks every now and then. She was once. Played rugby in grade school.

The fifteen-year-old checks her pits. Heads for the mirror to put on lip gloss. There's a guy in the Radio Shack that must be at least in college. He was looking at her tits, she's pretty sure. She glances down the room at the little girl making big circles on the tile wall like she's washing a window. The mom comes out, furious. She grabs hold of the girl's arm, pretty damn tight.

An old lady is washing up, putting on bright coral lipstick completely wrong for her fake red hair and smoothing her polyester tunic. She pretends not to look, but she's frowning at the mother, who looks at the teenager and says, "Need a babysitting job?"

"Oh," says the girl, shy in front of adults. "No. Thanks, though."

"Didn't think so," says the mother.

She sounds bitter, but the kid is clearly a fucking nightmare. Lip gloss girl thinks fondly of her mother for an instant, but her fondness dissolves like a dried potato flake. There's no starch to hold them together anymore.

The college student reluctantly leaves her stall. She's reeling from the smell of her own vomit. Her head is turned awkwardly to one side so the others won't see her hair, but the mother can see and hear through walls and knows the smell like any mother of three. She knows it's really fucking hard to get that smell out of hair, in particular. There was a night she washed her first child's hair four times, and still she smelled sour and the mother joked with her husband that they should put her through the washer with the crib sheets and rags. He'd looked at her like she was from hell, but he didn't offer to hold the child. He'd always had a weak stomach.

The college student practices the art of standing in a full room and making eye contact with no one. She leans her head down into the sink as if she merely wants to wash her face and, oops, her hair fell in too. But the sink sputters on and off and it's obvious she's hanging over the sink for a reason. She closes her eyes, pumps for soap, feels the bits of burger slip from her fingers into the sink, prays they're small enough to pass into the drain, more soap, lathering in a frenzy now, and everyone is quiet, watching her.

The young mother would have once, long ago, wanted to help, or cry.

The older woman, Carolyn, scurries out to the food court, brow furrowed in judgment as if her small lies are less despicable than this girl's bulimia or anorexia, diseases in vogue, she understands from her women's magazines.

In her stall, Marta listens to the water running, the feet shuffling, and the lack of words. Even the child is quiet, but the women are bigger out in the open room than they were in their stalls. She may never get out of here, Marta thinks. She folds her arms and lays forward on them.

Her buttocks are numb by now. She closes her eyes and waits. The water in the sink is a little soothing, like a fountain.

The college student has used way too much soap. She rinses and rinses and rinses, the water alternately freezing and scalding, her hands turning red. The mother picks up her daughter. Caitlin has been watching the hair-washing as if it were an award-winning Sesame Street episode. The college student stops rinsing, squeezes her hair by twisting it into an angry rope. The drips from the rope's end make the mother think of blood. She was a phlebotomist once. She hates band-aids as a result, but she carries them for her children. This girl, though, needs more than a band-aid, the mother suspects. She *suspects* in far more detail than she cares. She's run out of caring and they don't fucking sell it at the mall, do they? She's a mother. Maybe she should help, but she doesn't.

The college student moves like a crab to the towel dispenser. She feels the others watching her, but she's invisible with her hair hanging down. Like a burka, she thinks. A wet-hair shame-woven burka. She almost laughs, but the towels won't come out. She's reaching up with one hand and yanking furiously at the lever. Her hair is dripping on the peach speckled tiles. Who put in all this hideous peach? Still yanking, squeak, squeak, and water running in another sink and the little girl saying "Why is she upside-down, Mommy?" in a very angelic little voice.

The mother is frozen. She holds her demonic child with the angelic voice and watches the water drip on the floor.

The fifteen-year-old, who will within the hour have very bad sex with the Radio Shack salesman in the stock room and contract Chlamydia, glares at the mother, walks to the other dispenser and cranks out fifteen sheets of paper. She takes them to the girl and shoves them under the curtain of her hair. The college student takes the towels and begins to cry. The fifteen-

year-old glares again at the mother and storms out. The child begins to kick. Marta's toilet seat creaks as she stands, finally, and rubs at the backs of her legs for some feeling.

The mother looks at her reflection. Kisses the top of little Caitlin's head. In the dulled mirror, she looks supremely and righteously nurturing, loving, and motherly. Caitlin digs her forehead into her mother's shoulders. Time to go.

Moving deftly out of the gate, the mother leaves the girl with the bleeding hair behind and explodes into the food court. She looks frantically for the rest of her family. They are a few tables away, closer than she thought, eating ice cream without her. Caitlin wriggles from her grasp, runs for a handful of ketchup packets, and squeezes them until they burst open. She joyfully shelters the red gel between her hands and shows it to her mother. "Look. Isn't it pretty?" she says. The mother nods, but everything around her is ugly: the ketchup, the child, the food court and the red skin at the edges of her fingernails from too many dishes washed and a tendency to chew that she can't seem to outgrow.

Back in the Hearthstone Mall's once-new –and-sparkly (peach was popular then) ladies room, the college student slowly stands up and looks in the mirror. She'll need a new bottle of polish remover to get through the rest of the day. She wonders who handed her the towels. She had brushed the woman's hand with hers and had almost grabbed hold of it.

Another woman appears beside her, so silent and yet so *massive*, but who is she to judge anyone? The woman smiles. She has nice teeth. Her gums are not inflamed from stomach acid. She smells like gardenias and looks like a pillow with arms. She washes her hands, clears her throat, and waddles out.

The college student couldn't put her thoughts into words if you asked her to, but she feels, somehow, that if the enormous woman had stopped and held her, she would be okay. She

might walk out of the bathroom and not reach for acetone or chili cheese dogs or whatever she'll drink at the frat party tonight. She would see the world as a place of love, women the guardians of the wellspring of kindness, the ones who keep the lake at just the right level. But all she sees is her reflection and the endless peach tile. She hears the humming of voices outside, none of them friendly, none different from the others. Women are men, today is yesterday. All seven stalls are now empty and like an invitation, one toilet is still running, singing as stream, sewer pipe, the scrape of water against porcelain. The music as familiar to her as the hollow sound of her mother's voice on the telephone.