

# TOWEL HAG

## SCENES FROM A BATHHOUSE

Where we stand today may lead us to an entirely unexpected place tomorrow. We can be surprised by the places where creativity finds a foothold – or offers one. The creative impulse is as elusive as a dream. Upon waking we often remember snippets, images, feelings. In our memories as in our dreams, perspectives change. Objects, places, people inherit different meanings, contexts, forms. With some distance we may feel grateful for an experience. In the moment we may simply feel hopeless.

I worked for several years as a towel hag, (or bathhouse attendant to the uninitiated). A bathhouse is a place where gay men go to have sex. A typical bathhouse will have lockers and a number of rooms, which are not much bigger than a single bed. Rooms are sparsely furnished, usually with a narrow mattress on a wooden platform, a small side table and a locker. There is often a steam room or sauna, showers and a lounge of some kind. Men pay a fee to rent a room or a locker, usually for a 6 hour period.

Some bathhouses are quite posh and spa-like. Others are very basic and grotty. The Barracks fell into the latter category. The Barracks bathhouse occupied 26 Widmer Street in Toronto from 1974 to 2005. I worked there in the late 1990's. I used to tell people I did it for the glamour. 12 hour shifts in a smoky, windowless dump up to my armpits in spunk-splattered sheets and drunken louts, very glam. The Barracks was known as "Toronto's Leather and Denim Bathhouse". It was

small by Toronto's bathhouse standards. There were 50 lockers and 23 rooms on two floors of an old Victorian row house. Three rooms were called "Captain's Quarters" and were rented at a premium. They offered special features like slings, double beds with restraints, mirrored ceilings, glory holes and the like. There was a steam room, sauna, showers (including a stall for douching) and two washrooms. In the crumbling basement were 2 clothes washers and 2 dryers. You had to dodge drips from the ceiling which came from the leaking douche shower above.

A small lounge was furnished with a leather sofa and chair, a video game, two saloon chairs and a decrepit coffee machine. On one end of the lounge was a room we called "the cage". It was a space roughly 5' X 7'. On one end was a barred window into the vestibule where customers were checked in. One long side was open to the lounge. A partition of black wooden bars and a barred door separated the towel hag from the clientele. Built into this partition was a display case offering sex toys, lube, cigarettes and candy. Inside the cage was a small table about 3' X 2' and a chair. It was there that I spent much of my time when I wasn't checking people in and out, cleaning, doing laundry, removing drunk customers (sometimes physically) or fraternizing with the hot ones (often physically).

I would work three twelve hour shifts in three days, followed by four days off. The shifts were noon to midnight or midnight to noon. The noon to midnight shift was busier, which meant more running up and down the stairs since rooms turned over more quickly. The midnight to noon shift was more demanding. After 2 a.m. it got pretty quiet. It stayed that way until 6 a.m., at which time I would clean the place from top to bottom.

The absence of windows belied the time of day. Every shift was much like another. Many of the same customers came and went. Rooms filled and emptied and I cleared away the detritus. Load after load after load of laundry had to be hauled to and from the squalid basement as I danced the douche drip fandango. I was sustained by a diet of cigarettes and bad coffee. And a pair of scissors.

Every shift when there was a break in the action I would put scissors to paper and make cut-outs. The inspiration for them came directly from the erotically charged atmosphere I was immersed in. Crowned princes, winged warriors and flying phalli swirled and cavorted in joyful circle jerks. I created dozens and dozens of them. These delicate paper designs were my salvation. Why paper cut-outs? Well, the tools and materials were readily available. I would use whatever scraps of paper I could find. And there was something quietly calming, almost meditative about the process. I would fold, cut, unfold, then inspect my latest creation. Each one was a little surprise. I would marvel at their simple intricacy. They were like tiny fireworks.

“Towel Hag” recreates a bathhouse remembered. It incorporates some of the seminal aspects of the bathhouse experience. The outlined rooms here are the actual size of many of those at the Barracks. The chalk writings are reminiscent of messages that Barracks customers would leave on chalk boards posted in the washrooms. They were advertisements to let men know what the room occupants were looking for. Some of these writings are borrowed directly from those old chalk boards. Others recount my own experiences in the baths. And of course, there is the ever present sound of men having sex.

“Towel Hag” is described as a “performance installation”. As such it will evolve through the month of July. The luminescent “walls” will fade away each day. The chalk writings will come and go, much as they did with the Barracks customers. And as each cutout is completed it will become part of the paper curtain that will eventually enclose the cage. The cage will become a glowing box, a beacon.