

Impressions of John

**by Larry Carley
JIMC, Sr.**

Black letters stamped on the door read "MEN." As I enter the place, the bare porcelain fixtures stare at me blank and expressionless, sweating with tiny droplets of moisture. The place is cold and stagnant, like something out of the last century.

Tinges of rust eat like cancer at the cast iron pipes. Two naked bulbs glare down on me, and a row of toilets line the wall. Stalls without doors and stools without faces, having holes where faces should be.

An inviting roll of toilet paper hangs limply, beckoning the beholder. But I did not come to give of myself; I came to observe, to experience, to record this place for all eternity.

A battered and broken wire basket caresses the discarded crumples of paper beneath the window. The light from an air shaft struggles to penetrate the grime that coats the glass, but only a dim glow seeps through.

The green ceramic floor is broken only by the geometric patchwork of joints. Hazy grey scum dulls its enamel. Cracks and broken patches of plaster scar the walls, and halfway down, grey tile slabs encase the room like a mortuary.

A single fly buzzes about, aimlessly searching, never pausing in its flight.

A man enters, but has no face. He isolates himself in a stall and remains silent. He finishes, sighs, then washes his hands. The gurgling toilet swallows its meal in a swirl of sounds and suds. A bit of paper clings to the bowl refusing to drown.

The mirror hangs on the wall like a dead body, crucified by a dozen screws. Its back is dull and lifeless, the silver tarnished and peeling. It has grown senile with age, its vision dimmed.

The room has the usual conveniences; a towel dispenser without any towels, a soap dispenser without

any soap. Is this man's inhumanity to man?

A pair of sinks, mated for life, stand as open statues beneath the mirror. Tiny webs of filth and hair cling to their undersides. Their orifices are black and mysterious as though something were lurking within them.

A corroded drain lies in wait upon the floor, its open mouth ready to swallow up anything that ventures too close.

Pipes! Pipes, pipes, pipes! Pipes across the ceiling, pipes along the floor, pipes that scale the walls. Everywhere pipes. Hot pipes, cold pipes, grey pipes, grey with the dust of ages, the soot of time. Big pipes, little pipes, straight pipes, bent pipes, curious pipes. Where do they come from? Where do they go?

Another man enters, takes his place, hurries himself, and swiftly leaves. He has no time for washing his hands. He is too occupied with the ways of the world.

I hear the metallic sound of dripping water. One of the sinks must be chatting with the other. The monotonous tone bounces around the walls, the floor, the ceiling. It goes in and out the pipes and is lost in the corners. It is hollow and without meaning.

Two dead and forgotten cigarette butts lie cold in a corner. A matchstick huddles naked in a crack. Why don't they sweep the floor? Or is there any "they"?

A third man enters, admires himself in the mirror, and steals a careful glance in my direction. He skillfully avoids my eyes. He drags a comb through his greasy hair, then strides to the urinal. Using both hands, he's careful not to miss. Then, satisfied with his performance, he trots out.

A tiny black insect zigzags across the floor, following one crack and another. Where will his mindless journey take him? How does he survive? His existence is without substance or feeling, only mechanical responses to mechanical stimuli. I'm glad I'm not the insect.

I notice a dying hair clinging to the rim of a toilet. The curled hair is ugly and repulsive, yet somehow morbidly fascinating. My eyes try to avoid it, but it holds some power over them.

The stools are cold and hard, indifferent to any human presence. Sitting on one of them is not like sitting on mother's lap. It is more like sitting on a picket fence.

The door moans and another man enters. He hurries to the urinal, then rushes out. Come and gone in an instant, he is already lost into the past. My memory of him has faded as though he never were. Again I am alone in this alien place.

I feel uncomfortable and exposed beneath the burning bulbs. The walls keep staring at me even though I do not stare back. The time has come for me to flee this man-made Wasteland. I want no part of it any longer. I want to return to reality. I have accomplished what I set out to do: to experience this place, this void of voids. I have felt the separation from reality within this compound, and now I want out.

The door groans in protest as the prisoner escapes.