

The Dying Art of La Dame Pipi de Paris (excerpt)

by Heather Hartley

Appeared in *Tin House Magazine*, Issue # 35

My worries begin as I unzip my pants. I don't have any change and it's too late now. I seem to be repeating myself all over Paris.

Cautiously I open the stall and peek out. There she stands, wary and waiting with one rubber glove, her eyes mocking and intently fixed on me. It's impossible for the penniless to slither past la Dame Pipi de Paris, the Cerberus of the public toilets.

La Dame Pipi practices a dying art. She stands (or usually sits) guard inside the entrances of the seedy as well as classy toilets in many cafés, public gardens, department stores, and hotels of Paris. Instantly recognizable by the props and charms of her trade—a saucer of centimes, a mop, a couple of tabloids, the latest Sudoku, tiny vials of perfume, and an occasional pack of condoms—she's a stock figure of the capital. Even the most sophisticated Parisians say her title with nary a giggle.

You would think that living in this glittery city I might find something more genteel, more intellectual, more French to write about. But la Dame Pipi is infinitely French, gifted with a sharp intellect, possessing the ability to create a discreet, almost-refined atmosphere in her kingdom: les toilettes. The métier has welcomed a range of women, from Mademoiselle Georges, the mistress of Napoléon III, and Amélie Nothomb, the Belgian writer adored and adopted by the French, to women who just need the work.

For me, la Dame Pipi is the epitome of Paris. Without her, you can't retouch your lipstick and fix your décolleté (Parisienne preoccupations) or pee and wash your hands (Anglo-Saxon necessities). "Visiting the powder room" is a strange hyphen of time between the mania of the outside world and an intimate, inevitable moment. In a country where public and private are extremely divided, la Dame Pipi, a public servant, is witness to this most private, vulnerable moment. She sees what you cannot—or will not—see.