

HOW WE BEHAVE

Kameron Ray Morton

There are people climbing the bridges spanning the Danube river at all times of the day. One of the bridges even seems to encourage it. There are rails all the way to the top of the Chain Bridge, something to hold on to as you climb. I'm afraid of heights. Watching the people walking up the curve of the bridge for pictures makes me nervous.

"We are now crossing from the Pest side to the Buda side," the tour guide says, her voice sounding into my ears. She's American, but she says 'Pesht.' I can't decide if I like that or not. "You can see our destination up above us."

I'm not looking at the white stone castle. There's a girl climbing higher than everyone else, her skirt flapping in the wind. Her panties are black and lacy.

"Someone should tell her to get down," my mother says, talking over the tour guide's heavy breathing. "These Europeans have no safety regulations."

It's something she says every time the two of us go abroad. The hotel windows in Italy that opened and had no screens when I was twelve. The balconies in Switzerland with too-wide holes in the railings when I was fourteen. Now the bridge in Hungary when I'm twenty.

There are thirty people on this tour, an assortment of families and couples making their way through crowds of people, following the short waddling woman with a bright blue flag. She narrates as she continues over the bridge and to the switchback path up to the old part of the city, panting in our ears. I take out my earbuds and turn off the receiver around my neck. My mother frowns at me but doesn't tell me to start listening again. The guide leads everyone to an overlook across the train tracks, and I can see the girl again.

She's still far too high up, almost to the point where the curve becomes vertical. I can barely see her, a spot of pale pink on the gray metallic bridge. I wonder what the dress would do if she jumped. Fly up around her to reveal black lace and shining skin? Cover her face so she can't see the water?

There is a couple on the trip who ignore their son. He wanders around the group as we continue up the hill and past the palace, walking towards Budapest's most famous cathedral. There's something off about the family, something sad. His parents are too old to be his parents, but he calls them Mom and

Dad regardless. They ignore him in the same blasé way they ignore each other. Some of the other children have formed small groups, darting around the slow-moving adults as we meander down the sidewalk. The boy stays determinedly by himself until he ends up walking next to me, his earbuds dangling around his neck.

“My mom says you’re a tranny,” he says, looking up at me with squinted eyes and a frown.

My mother’s a few steps ahead of us, paying too close attention to our panting guide to hear what he’s said. Me being called “tranny” is the kind of thing she deals with when she’s around, not because I think I can’t but because in general, I refuse. Why is it up to me to explain things? Why does it even matter?

“Did you see the girl on the bridge?” I ask him. “The one who climbed almost up to the top?”

His eyebrows come down over his eyes, and the corners of his mouth drop. “What?”

“There was a girl,” I tell him, motioning back behind us. “She’d climbed all the way up until it was vertical.”

He recovers fast, his eyebrows un-scrunching. “The wind kept blowing her skirt.”

“Black lace.”

He smiles. “Black lace.”

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The only reason there are any children on this river cruise is because it’s organized by the largest entertainment company with the most successful theme parks in the world. The only way to know its affiliation, aside from the children, are the animated movies. On the screen, a young girl is cutting her hair to join the army when the boy sits down across from me in the lounge, interrupting my reading.

“My dad told me not to talk to you,” he says. The other children wear t-shirts and shorts. He’s in a polo and ironed khakis, almost a miniature of his father with the exception of his hair, bright blond and sticking up in different directions.

“My dad used to tell me not to talk to people, too,” I say.

“Is your dad here?”

“No. Just my mom.”

“Is tranny a bad word?” His eyebrows are down over his eyes again.

“Yes,” I say. “But your parents won’t agree with me.”

He nods and sits back in his chair. “My parents are wrong.”

He doesn’t need me to tell him he’s right.

The kids sitting in front of the projector screen aren’t watching the movie.

They’re talking and giggling, crumbling their complimentary cookies.

“You don’t want to sit with your friends?” I ask him.

“They aren’t my friends.”

“You don’t want to be with people your own age?”

He shakes his head. “I’m the only one who’s ten.”

“I’m twenty. I’m too old to hang out with you.”

“That’s only ten years,” he says. “My dad is fourteen years older than my mom.”

“You don’t want to watch the movie?” I ask.

He turns around in his chair to stare back at the projector screen where the girl is trying very hard to be a man. He turns back to me. “She’s my mom’s favorite princess, but that doesn’t make sense because she’s a lot like you, and my mom thinks you’re wrong.”

“You should major in gender studies,” I say.

“What’s that?”

“Ask your parents.”

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The night we have dinner at the chef's table I can't decide what to wear. My mother has put on her dress and pearls, styled her dyed blonde hair into an artful bun held in place with hairspray and faith. I'm standing in our 170-square-foot room staring at the wardrobe, still in the oversized bathrobe provided by the cruise.

“Your make-up looks nice,” my mother says, putting on her matching pearl earrings. “I was starting to think you'd go the whole trip without using any.”

I've been wearing baggy shirts over my bound chest, shorts with wide legs or loose-fitting jeans. Only sunscreen on my face, even though it'd be easy to smooth out the color in my cheeks, the dark circles under my eyes.

“Just put on the dress,” she says.

“This kid told me his mom called me a tranny.”

“Well, now you'll really confuse them.”

“But now they're gonna say I'm just a lesbian. Or a tomboy, which is worse.”

Mom walks over to the wardrobe and flips through the clothes on the rack. "You didn't bring a suit."

"My black jeans look pretty formal."

"But you were really excited to wear the dress."

She pulls out the black dress with its lace overlay and lays it down on her twin bed, the skirt trailing off the sides. "You've already got make-up on," she says. "They'll be confused regardless."

"I could take it off."

She sighs and runs her hand over the cap sleeves of the dress. "If that's what you want. I don't think anyone will say anything, though. It'd be rude."

"I'm sure their kids would report it to me if I asked," I say.

"So, don't ask," she says. "Honestly, Avery, we're going to be late."

The dress swishes when I walk, and my heels click too loudly on the tile floors. There are mirrors in the hallway, and I look in each one of them. It's the first time I've really seen my figure since we flew in to Hungary, when I was wearing yoga pants and a tank top. My pixie cut never requires extra fixing, but I spent thirty minutes on my face. I used a light base to make my cheekbones more prominent and my nose look longer, a darker one to accen-

tuate the hollows in my cheeks and make my jawline look skinnier. Shimmering pinks to make my hazel eyes pop and match my lipstick. Nude heels and a keyhole back.

The waiter who hands me and my mom glasses of champagne and sits us at a six-person table doesn't say anything, even though he's only ever seen me in pants and button-down shirts. Rebecca and Jonathan, British ex-pats living in Singapore who we met on the excursion to an Austrian apricot farm two days ago, are similarly unaffected. The chef's table is not just one table but several that seat either four or six people in a room at the back of the ship with a panoramic view of the Danube and the sunset. My mother and I got here early so we were given nice seats, our backs to the entrance of the room so our view of the river and its green banks is unobstructed. Because of this, I don't see the boy's parents until they're being seated next to me. The waiter is explaining the wine options to my mother and me, and while I haven't been drinking much, despite having the opportunity, I have him pour me a glass of white that's meant to pair with our appetizer and salad courses. I am not above getting drunk in the face of bigots, even if they don't know that I know they're bigots.

The boy's mother's name is Janice, and her husband is Richard. By the time the appetizers come around, Richard has roped Jonathan into a conversation about the global market, and my mother is talking to Rebecca about how beautiful Switzerland is. Janice is quiet next to me, cutting her fish into individual bites. Her husband is cutting his food one bite at a time. I wonder if he's ever told his wife that she's giving herself away by cutting her food the way she does, and if he did, why she didn't listen. She's certainly dressed the part of a well-to-do wife in a conservative blue cocktail dress that almost matches her husband's tie in color. It's the small slip in behavior that indicates such nice meals aren't something she always knew.

"I spoke with your son the other day," I say because I refuse to sit in silence for a two-hour, four-course dinner. "He's very smart."

Janice's knife slides over the plate too hard and it squeals, making me flinch. "He is, isn't he? We're very lucky to have him."

I wait for her to say more, but she doesn't, and I don't know what else to talk about. Our wine switches to red when the entrée comes, and Janice cuts all her meat at once. I try to remember when I was told not to do that, that it wasn't proper dining etiquette. Did my dad tell me at some fundraiser dinner that I was too little to be at? Or was it my mom, years after he died, telling me

at a nice restaurant on vacation? I can't remember, and I hate that I can't remember because then it feels like I just always knew that I wasn't supposed to cut all my food at once, and that can't be right because that isn't something you just know. That's learned, observed, taught to people to make them fit into the rules of How We Behave at Fancy Dinners. Because there's only two of us, my mom and I have to sit with other couples in the main dining room, where we're served slightly less fancy four-course meals at a slightly faster rate. This trip costs \$5,000 per person, not including plane tickets or the meals on our own or any kind of souvenir shopping, but I find flaws in 'etiquette' with every person we sit with. Buttering an entire roll at once, letting their napkins sit next to their plates the entire meal. Stupid rules I only notice because I've been taught, but if I can't remember when I was taught, how will I remember that these things are made up?

"My father died when I was young, too," Janice says, almost whispering, making me wonder for a moment if she really is talking to me. "My mother and I would take trips like this around the anniversary of his death."

She's talked to my mother then, I think, because seeing a mother and daughter alone doesn't normally lead to the assumption of a dead husband and father. I want to be mad that she's had a conversation with Janice, but I never

told her about the boy. It's my own fault my mother didn't know not to reveal any sort of vulnerability to this woman.

"His birthday was today," I say. Her talking about her dad seems like a peace offering, even if she has no reason to think she needs to make peace with me. I don't want to turn it down. "That's why we made reservations to do this dinner tonight. It feels like celebrating that way."

"We used to tell the waiters it was my birthday, so they'd bring out a piece of cake with a candle." Janice puts her fork down across her plate with her knife next to it at a diagonal. The correct way to communicate she's finished to the waiter, if that's what she's doing. Is that even how the silverware is supposed to be used in Europe? Or are we both wrong?

"Grief makes us do funny things, doesn't it?" Janice says. "Dressing up like a boy. You'll grow out of it, I'm sure."

The wine is switched to coffee, and we're brought a sampling of desserts. I eat in silence even though Janice tries to talk, asking direct questions about school or how I've liked the trip that I ignore even as I feel guilty for doing it because she doesn't mean to be unkind. I just don't have the energy to argue with her.

Janice and Richard leave as soon as Richard decides he's finished. My mother and I go with Rebecca and Jonathan to the lounge for after-dinner martinis and stumble into an impromptu karaoke session with the kids that are still up and a few of their parents. "Sweet Caroline" is playing, and the adults are jumping on the "bah, bah, bah." The kids are watching with wide eyes, having never seen their parents so excited to sing anything. I'm sure the unlimited wine with dinner helps.

The boy is there, standing not quite close enough to the other kids to be part of their group. He's looking at me, and his eyebrows are scrunched.

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"You looked pretty last night," the boy says. He's whispering to me in the Benedictine Abbey of Melk, Austria, surrounded by marble and hard wooden pews.

I don't tell him that last night was an exception, that most mornings I wake up, and the idea of a push-up bra and a cinched-in waist makes my skin crawl. That after a childhood of banquets to raise money for the local symphony or the animal shelter or the campaign of a senator, I can't think of getting dressed up without imagining dresses and heels and fake eyelashes. He doesn't ask me about that, so I don't have to tell him.

“How do I look today?” I ask.

He looks me up and down, considering my loose clothes and my undorned face. “Normal, I guess.”

The feature of the sanctuary is the pipe organ, decorated with cherubs covered in gold leaf. I can’t see it up in the balcony without craning my neck. I doubt the boy can see it from where we’re standing, but he looks up anyway.

“You looked like the girl on the bridge,” he tells me.

Across the sanctuary, Janice has spotted us. She starts walking, but slowly, trying to keep her shoes from making too much noise on the hard, cold floors.

“I couldn’t be the girl on the bridge,” I say. “I’m afraid of heights.”

Kameron Ray Morton is an MFA candidate in fiction at Columbia University. Their prose has appeared in *Carbon Culture Review*, *FLARE: The Flagler Review*, and *STORGY Magazine*, among others, and their chapbook *Intersections* was a finalist in Paper Nautilus’s Debut Series Chapbook Contest. They feel pressured to drink less coffee, but find their best ideas emerge from a caffeine-induced high. Currently, they serve as a Senior Prose Editor for *Typehouse Magazine*. Find them on Instagram @tallsoyflatwhite or online at KameronRayMorton.com.